Accept

On Conditions Of

By Maverick Lee Springer

Dedicated to Julia Fowler

The Concept of Decadence. Waste, decay, elimination need not be condemned: they are necessary consequences of life, of the growth of life. The phenomenon of decadence is as necessary as any increase and advance of life: one is in no position to abolish it. Reason demands, on the contrary, that we do it justice.

- Friedrich Nietzsche,

The Will to Power

Accept on Conditions of

One.

In the end, I remained, changed, whole, and stood once more on that edge of civilization, that edge of the wild as one called it, the frontier. The cold dry air, the vast empty plains, the sleet and snow, the beaten wheat shafts, and the fog hovering just above it all, they're home. After that winter, I vowed never to return here, but this place no longer haunts me as it once did. Gone are the evil spirits and dream specters, the torturers, the devils, all gone with the passage of time and the winds of spring, of rebirth, whispering to me words of solace in the voice of a lost lover or past friend.

My name is Marcus Packer, and for a long time I thought I would find freedom through the external, getting my first car, moving to Hunting, sitting the Dean's House over winter break, and leaving Montana, but nothing ever gave me the lasting freedom I was looking for, they only

provided a short respite from that lingering sense of entrapment. I despised that feeling. The first time I noticed it was after my mother died. I was eleven at the time, and I still remember how the birds sang and the sun shined the day they buried her, all disrespectfully bright, too beautiful for death. I didn't cry, I was too shocked, too at odds with the world to know what to do or how to react; sometimes I feel guilty about that. My father couldn't even bring himself to look at me that day. At the time I believed he blamed me for what happened to her, or worse, utterly hated me because of it, lies of course, but how was I to know?

Before she died, we lived in a small apartment overlooking the downtown of Great Falls, Montana, but after she passed, my father moved us into a trailer house outside of city limits. I never understood why he did this, but I suppose it had something to do with the environment and the memories of her connected with it. Never again could we wander down central, ride the trolly to those fiesta lit street shops and meander round the catwalked swan pond until the moon came out and gazed upon that city. That place died with her, and what replaced it was a starved landscape, a desolate plain of brown fields and rare scattered neighbors, all of whom were far older than

myself, ratty, and either wrung out dry or lost down a road of vices. I couldn’t stand it there. I felt deprived.

Life after my mother’s death was incredibly lonely, a strange and obscure time devoid of true experience and shrouded by myth and fantasy. Outside of school I saw next to no one, and days were largely defined by reading: the Lord of the Flies, Crime and Punishment, Paradise Lost, and any sort of mythology I could get my hands on. Something about the occult, taboo, and ancient worlds fascinated me, gripping me with such enthusiasm as to let the old gods of Wotan, Enlil, and Thoth roam freely through my mind, leading me deep into the halls of Amenti and across the plateau of Leng. I performed several rituals down by a creek that ran a quarter mile from our house, late night imbibements by candlelight complete with improvised dances and chants that ended in me filthy and exhausted, drenched in the waters and mud of the Earth yet entranced by the stars and gods of my imagination. Unfortunately, I didn’t bring this same level of enthusiasm to school. If I was anything, I was an unremarkable underachiever who simply slipped by unnoticed. I didn’t have many friends, I never went to the prom, and my grades were never particularly good while my SAT scores

were barely above average. Overall, my middle school and highschool years could be most accurately summarized as forgettable, and looking back I recognize a constant bleakness that lingered over them where the only highlight was my wild escapes from the rational world into that of the irrational.

My father was largely absent in my life. He was a gruff, lumberjack sort of man who bore little thought or care to raise me as his own life slowly decayed into one of passivity. He worked at the refinery in town, a large bellowing stink factory of a place that demanded long hours and left him completely exhausted by the weekend. He'd sit there in front of the TV drinking cheap beers as gunshots fired from the screen throughout the house. He didn't seem to exist beyond that couch. Occasionally, he'd take me up to the mountains to go camping or hiking, but these trips were rare, short, and full of memories I'd rather forget. He was always quick to anger with me, and the only time he could seem to stand me was late at night when he was drunk. I don't hate him now, but at the time, I think I did.

After highschool, I went on to study locally at Charlie Russell University. When I first started, I had no idea what I wanted to major in. I liked art, painting specifically, I had ever since I was little, but after meeting several failed art majors I decided against majoring in it. No one ever encouraged me to pursue art except my mother. She used to take me to the Western Art Show, the local museums, galleries, and even helped me enter a few pieces of my own into the state fair. Some days, all I wanted to do was stand in the kitchen for hours and paint, watching as the sun rose and hung behind the clouds before it slowly set beyond the river skyline. After she died, I found my interest in the arts slowly waned, and by the time I started going to college I was painting maybe once every year or two. In the end, I decided to major in criminology, though still minored in fine art.

I enjoyed my time at CRU, the small yet winding campus, its narrow and ornate red brick buildings, the classes that rarely had more than twenty students in them, and the teachers who always had time for questions, it all felt so personal. But my time there didn’t last long, and by the end of my first year I was forced to transfer to a different school. Due to an increasing lack of attendance, CRU

slashed all courses unrelated to the fine arts, closing entire departments overnight in an effort to rebrand themselves as an art school. Sure, I could transfer easily enough, but at the time I was unsure if I really wanted to continue my schooling. I went back and forth for weeks, struggling to convince myself if it was even worth it, as now I'd have to pay considerably more, more than my grants and loans would stretch. Over my last spring at CRU, I toured several schools, mostly state ones but also several private colleges, and it wasn't until I visited the University of Jeffrey Ross down in Hunting that I made up my mind.

The tour was at the end of spring semester, and in a predictably unpredictable fashion Montana whipped up a snowstorm that swept through Hunting with as much ferocity as it did beauty. The campus itself was a picturesque collage of old brick buildings, blocky cold war ones, and modern style studios, all tightly woven through the downtown of Hunting. Even in the midst of a blizzard the campus teemed with life, students and teachers alike rushing to their next class as snow swooped up behind them in long elegant white curls. We walked past the student union building, the Tiez building, the river that cut through campus, and the newly completed Ross Theatre,

where a statue of Ross himself stood studying the complete works of Shakespeare, underneath which the school's motto, "We are performers of excellence," was etched; but it wasn't until we reached Fernsby Hall, the sociology building and the one I'd be spending most of my time in, that I became intent upon staying.

By the time we neared Fernsby Hall along the eastern edge of campus, over half of everyone on the tour left and the storm grew so thick and violent that I could hardly see past twenty feet. Suddenly though, the land dipped down and a massive colonial building came into view, like some shroud lifted from the area, revealing the sociology department in all its academic glory. All around, by the lampposts, up the steps, and along the veranda lounged and roamed students dressed in tweed coats, red flannels, and Patagonia vests; all conversing, cramming, and debating whilst the storm blew by overhead. Fernsby may not have been the first image my mind conjured up when thinking of the site of scholarly conduct, but upon witnessing it became unshakably linked, inseparable even. Sure, it didn't have the gilded halls or gothic turrets of older, more prestigious universities, but it had something else. Here students sat defiantly studying as winds and storms battered around

them, too preoccupied to notice the change in weather, let alone care. It was the unlikely marriage of the literary and learned world with the natural and wild one.

UJR had this captivating allure about it, a bold intrepid spirit that shouted, “Here! Here lies greatness, adventure, and freedom. Come explore and learn from us all we have to offer, for we are performers of excellence amongst a sea of mediocrity.” And all I wanted was to be a part of it. I wanted to fish in the campus stream, to ski down every slope, to wander around and sleep beneath the swaying trees in the autumn. Everywhere I looked I saw students smiling, eager to devour their next class without a worry about money or anything else in the world, and somehow I convinced myself that I could be just like them; and that fall I arrived on the campus eager to attend my first semester.

One thing I noticed early on was the certain cliques that existed on the campus. There were the ‘Patagonias’, defined by their signature and universal clothing brand that expressed their love of outdoor activities, adventurous trips, and all things modern. Then there were the ‘Cufflinks’, those who came from wealthy families or aspired for something more, whether that be through the

study of business, music, law, art, or sociology. Finally, there were the ‘Greenies’, the druggies, the partiers, the ones who came for a good time and likely wouldn’t last long enough to see it through. These three were the dominant groups I noticed, but there were smaller ones as well: the country kids, the jocks and fraters, the britneys, the emos, and the foreign transfer students. This all isn’t to say that certain individuals couldn’t sway and move between cliques with ease as I myself often did, unhindered by the ideas of group thought, appeasement, and loyalty.

When I first started going to UJR, I was overwhelmed by the environment and the amount of freedom I had. When I wasn’t in class, I’d often find myself wandering the art building, studying in Fernsby, lazing on the grounds, or attending whatever plays, events, and lectures the school had planned. My best days at UJR were those early days where I could take an easy breath, relax, and focus on my studies, but they didn’t last long. By my second month, I was already seeing the consequences of switching to a more expensive school. My loans and grants didn’t cover my expenses, and I had to sign up for a payment plan with monthly installments. I started working part time, scrubbing dishes in the stuffy, humid kitchen of one of the

dining halls during the week. It wasn't too bad and still afforded me some time on the weekends, but it was hardly enough to keep up with my payments and by my second semester I had to switch to a better paying job. I worked overnight shifts at a crummy gas station on the corner of campus avenue and 14th street, and with it came an irregular sleep schedule, dwindling grades, and a complete loss of free time. Even with working full time, my payments were often late. I'd walk into class exhausted, hardly able to focus on anything as everything around me blurred; assignments, classes, and faces all out of focus. And during the night I'd ring up my friends and colleagues' beers and watch them stroll back to the campus or across the downtown, laughing giddily and wishing me a goodnight as they left into that area once more regulated to daydreams.

My roommate, Christian Hayes, or Chippy, often left on the weekends to go skiing or camping up in the mountains. Occasionally, he'd ask me if I wanted to go, but I always declined because I couldn't afford to miss my job and didn't have the spare money. Chippy was a tall, lanky figure who always reeked of weed and heavy cologne. He was a Californian, a Patagonia, and a Greenie, always eager to offer a joint or two whenever there was any semblance of

an opportunity to smoke. Every once in a while when I had a couple of free hours we'd go out and hit the bars downtown or roam the campus on our longboards, but these trips were rare and the extent of our time as friends before winter break.

Over the course of my first year, I returned home twice, once during winter and again during the summer, each time serving as a reminder of why I despised it so much. Upon my return to UJR, I decided to never return home and would do anything to stay in Hunting, as even with the struggle of balancing my social life, classes, and work, Hunting still gave me the most freedom I had felt in my life. During that fall semester, I applied to dozens of better paying jobs, house sittings, apartments, and roommate inquiries, but nothing seemed to bring the results I hoped for. I had a friend who lived over in North Dakota, Sam Koontz, that said I could stay with him, but that was further away than I wished to be and was really a last resort. As winter break neared, the time I spent searching the web increased dramatically. Chippy often accompanied me through these mid and small hour scowerings. He had a girlfriend, Erin Tanberg, who he wanted to spend winter break with, but preferably not at her aunt's. The two of us

stayed up late into the night, drinking cheap beers and filling out applications until we either got too drunk or tired to carry on. Soon the last leaves of fall were being swept away with the heavy winds of winter, and as everyone else was absorbed in their finals, we were struggling to find a place to stay.

Dorms prepared by setting up signs like “Don’t forget to check with your RA!” and “See you in the spring!” accompanied by a picture of the school mascot, Buck, a figure I held a queer distaste towards. I hated those signs, and often scoffed when I saw one. They assumed everything was going to be okay and that we’d all be back next semester to pick up where we left off, when many of us wouldn’t. It was like part of me knew that was the last true semester I’d spend there every time I saw one of those signs, but for some reason I ignored that feeling.

The Friday before finals week, I opened my mailbox to find a letter addressed by Scott Hall, the dean of students. When I first saw it my heart skipped a beat. I assumed it must have something to do with my dwindling grades, late bills, or any of the other numerous problems I had, but I was pleasantly surprised by what it said on the back, and

my curiosity piqued. It read, “Accept on the conditions of…”, to which I immediately opened it.

1. You completely attend the stay of December 6th, 2018 through to January 16th, 2019.
2. To Maintain the upkeep of the grounds, the house, the cabin, and my two dogs (Remus and Lady, both lovely creatures.)

If these agreements are kept, you will be rewarded with an additional $2000 in your student account balance as of spring semester. In addition to this, any accommodations you find within my household are free to you upon the agreement that there is plenty enough for me to manage with at the start of spring semester.

Below I’ve listed my office information and phone number. Give me a call or stop by if this is an opportunity you may be interested in.

-Dean of Students, Scott Hall

I was astounded, but within a few moments started flipping it over and examining it more closely. I didn't remember applying to him and questioned its authenticity, but it was too good of an opportunity to be ignored. I ran up to my tiny dorm room and showed it to Chippy, who was just as eager to find out if it was real.

"Dude, if this is legit, then you're set man! And he's paying you two grand?"

"Yeah!" I said enthusiastically. "And if it is, I'll see if you can come along too!"

"Great," he said. "When's he leave?"

I glanced down at the letter. "Looks like three thirty."

"Well, you better get your ass over to his office then!" He said, practically shoving me back out the door. "You only got thirty minutes to catch him before he leaves for the weekend!"

I was in such a hurry that I must have bumped into and pushed past every person I saw along the way. To be honest, it was the first time I felt truly excited about anything since I got accepted. By the time I got to his office

on the other side of campus it was already 3:20, and when I saw the old lady behind the desk in front of his office, my heart sank a little, and I doubted I'd be able to get past her in time.

"Hi," I said, walking up to the desk. "Is the Dean of Students in? Dean Hall?"

"Yes, but he'll be leaving soon," she said, staring at her monitor. "Did you have an appointment with him?"

"No, but I got this letter from him about a job op-"

"Oh!" she said, suddenly perking up. "The house sitting job! Yes, just go right in, he's over there," pointing to his office door down the hall.

"Oh, thanks," I said, genuinely surprised before approaching his door.

His office had a warm, oaken interior, with all sorts of UJR memorabilia and photos of past classes and projects tacked to the walls. He sat behind a large mahogany desk, rifling through stacks of papers as a portrait of Jeffery Ross glared at me from over his shoulder.

“May I help you?” He said, pulling his attention away from a paper just long enough to glimpse me. He had a head of frizzy gray hair and a lax look upon his face with a pair of glasses that sat on the tip of his nose, giving him the look of an old, distinguished scientist or retired Professor Plum.

“Yes, so I received this letter for a house sitting job from you? I was just wondering if that was still available, and if it was possible for my roommate and his girlfriend to come along.”

“Well, yes, it is still available,” He said, dropping the paper onto his desk at once. “You must be Marcus Packer,” standing up and outstretching his hand, which I readily shook. “Now there will already be a few others up there with you, but I don’t see any problem with your friends joining. I’ll send them invitations on Monday. Their names?”

I gave him Chippy and Erin’s information, which he quickly jotted down on a scrap of paper before he began preparing to leave for the weekend.

“Thank you, Mr. Hall! I really appreciate this,” I said, shaking his hand once more.

“No need, thank you! Now I must inform you that I will already be gone when you arrive, but I’ve given a key to one of your fellow house sitters who will already be there. And feel no rush to be there by any specific time, he’ll be arriving a bit earlier and can manage on his own until you arrive.”

And to that, I took my leave, but not without saying thank you one last time.

“Bitch ass!” Chippy said in the dining hall. “That’s great!”

“Yeah, thank you so much,” Erin said, while leaning her head against Chippy’s cheek. She was quiet, warm, and much like Chippy in her own right. They would have seemed like the perfect couple if it weren’t for their occasional quarrels, after which Chippy would return to our dorm, exhausted and dismissive, but those days were few and far between.

“No problem,” I said.

Over the next week, we finished our finals and packed our things as flakes of late snow swirled by our window. I loved watching them blow past and scatter down to the street below, reminding me that in just a couple of days, I’d be

free from classes, work, and responsibilities for more than an entire month.

“Alright, Me and Erin will see you up there tomorrow!” Chippy said, warmly patting me on the back as I closed the trunk of my car.

“Sweet man! Sounds good,” I said, adopting his more relaxed slang as I climbed into the driver’s seat.

“And drive carefully. I heard some warnings about the weather.”

“For sure, I’ll see you guys there.”

“Yeah man, take care!” He said before closing the door to my car

Two.

The Dean of Students' house was just over an hour drive from Hunting, straight through the Adle mountains and up to Anthill, a lone standing peak. The first half of the drive was quite pleasant. A thin fog rolled through the mountain pass as the sun set beyond the blue crags and golden clouds of an imperial sky. Once the light disappeared, the clouds lengthened and trees and ledges jutted out, casting the landscape in a mysterious, mystic sort of quality that caused my mind to wander with the gentle purr of my BMW and the elegant downfall of snow. I remember wondering if the dean took the drive every day or just on the weekends, as from now until late spring it could be quite a dangerous trip to make, let alone time consuming. Soon the winds began to pull and tug at the car as the snowfall turned violent, piling up on the roads in heavy drifts and blowing so hard and fast that I could hardly see. After crossing a bridge some six miles from my destination, I suddenly lost control, swerving wildly from left to right, traction light flashing rapidly as I was tossed into some acute patch of flatland with a swift crunch of deep snow.

The car was stuck, dreadfully, and there was no way I was getting it out by myself. I had no choice but to abandon it, grabbing the few bags I could before locking it up to make the rest of the journey on foot. I hated the idea of leaving it. I spent every cent I saved up over summer on it, and even then I had to haggle the price. Every car I had before it felt dull and lifeless, but this one had character. I loved that car, and it served me well until its end.

My heavy overcoat blocked the wind, but a stinging cold still gnawed at my neck, ears, hands, and feet. Soon there was only the forest, the snow, and the road. I followed it up through the mountains, and on either side stretched enormous pines, so tall that only a strip of sky was visible above. Every once in a while, one side of the forest would slope down drastically or completely drop off, and I'd watch as the snowflakes dived into the darkness, disappearing into the net of tree branches below, leaving me to wonder how long it'd take me to hit the bottom, and how long it'd take for someone to find me.

I must have walked for nearly an hour before I began breathing so hard and fast that I thought I might pass out. My feet dragged through the snow as my hands struggled

to keep hold of my bags. Parts of me froze as others boiled with sweat. I could hardly breathe. Looking up, I saw for the briefest of moments the silhouette of a bird gliding through the storm before I collapsed. I laid there for who knows how long, my mind fogging like the windows of my car as I stared up at the flurry of shooting snowfall. I was out in the middle of nowhere, by myself, in the heart of a blizzard with no transportation or cell reception, and yet I felt oddly calm about the whole thing. There hadn't been a single house or car for the hour I had been walking, and there was no one coming to help me. I thought about what I might do if a bear or wolf happened upon me. Would I even make it ten feet? Could I even get up? Shortly after that thought, I managed to stand again, and push myself on.

It was tucked away in a patch of evergreens straddling the base of Anthill which rose up behind it, a three-story mansion styled as a modern cabin, with large grand windows, multiple porches and decks, and an absolutely massive footprint. In the dark blue of the night, I could see a fireplace flicker from within, casting its orange glow through the falling flakes and across the yard. I had no way of knowing if it was the right house or not, but either way I approached it, being far too tired to not ask of hospitality.

I walked up and sat my bags down on the porch before I gave the door a hard knock and rested against the wall to catch my breath. I didn't expect the door to open as suddenly as it did, but within a moment it flung open and there stood one of the most curious characters I've had the pleasure of meeting.

His name, I learned, was Colin Campbell, and he stood there as a sort of cross between an emo, a stoner, and a young Andy Warhol, wearing a pair of tattered black skinny jeans, a drug rug, and a charcoal suit coat. The wind played with his mop of white blonde hair and a cigarette dangled between his boney fingers as he held the door open.
"Damn, you look terrible," He said casually before taking a drag off the cigarette. "You here for the house sitting job as well?"

"Yes," I said, still catching my breath.

"Well, here, let me get those for you," he said, picking up my bags. "Go on in and sit by the fire. Acquaint yourself with the others and get warmed up. I'll get you something to drink," He said, ushering me in before dashing off.

The first floor and majority of the house was done in dark woods, where the sparse yet well placed lighting gave it the moody darkness of a pre-electric time. I walked through the foyer, past a towering grandfather clock, and into the warm, spacious interior of the parlor, where I sat down in a welcoming red armchair. A bearskin rug stretched out in front of a large crackling fireplace, above which hung a boar hide with a massive iron spear.

“Hall got that last summer in Texas,” said a young man with slick black hair sitting closer to the fireplace, its light glinting off his rectangular lenses. His voice was low, dignified, but had a confidence behind it that occasionally forced it into a command, and deeper than need be. “Name’s Jonathan Entes. You were in Dr. Anderson’s class for a bit, yes?”

“Yes, I was. Marcus Packer!” I said, shaking his hand. “I just couldn’t seem to agree with his teaching, very… self centered.”

Even sitting down, I could see he was a tall person, a brooding rain cloud of a character whose nose occasionally twitched in a way that reminded me of the more ‘experienced’ greenies. He wore a dark tweed and black tie

which accented his, at the time, welcoming demeanor; definitely a cufflink. The strange thing was that I didn't remember him in Dr. Anderson's class at all. I dropped it after a month and it was fairly large, so maybe I just never noticed him, but either way, he noticed me.

"Hmm, well I can see how one might think that. Anyways, this is my good friend Kaisar Williams. He hasn't been truly home in over ten years." Motioning to a silhouette that stood next to a grand piano in the corner of the room.

I thought it odd how he introduced his friend, as if I were Kaiser, I doubt that'd be the first thing I'd want people to know about me. It felt demeaning.

He stood there holding a glass of whiskey in one hand and a cigar in the other. A spiked crown of golden hair sat atop his head, and a blue sport coat hung around his chest, revealing a tan knit sweater beneath; cufflink. His features were strong yet elegant, aristocratic, and he carried himself with the air of royalty; the lost prince of Alexandria come to rebuild his rightful kingdom. He stepped forward into the light of the fireplace. "Pleased to meet you," he said, shooting me a childlike smirk.

I nodded. “Pleased to meet you.”

Soon after, Colin returned and promptly shoved a glass of brandy in my hand before taking a seat on the arm of my chair. “St-Remy. Cheap stuff, but fine all the same. Drink up, it’ll do you good.” I only now noticed the pungent odor that hung from his words. He’d been drinking heavily, something I soon learned to be normal for him. If I had to say to which clique he belonged, it would be the Cufflinks, but like myself he was something of an enigma, a drifter, and this group was simply the one that fit him best. Unlike myself though, he came from a wealthy family (more so than either of his compatriots, I believe), and his father had bought him a brand new Camaro as a birthday present, which I learned he somehow managed to bring up here.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the front door.

“That must be the rest of us!” Colin said, lifting up and rushing towards the door.

‘The rest of us?’ I thought. ‘But Chippy and Erin said they’d come tomorrow.’

“Yep, there’ll be six of us,” Kaiser said, trying to console my obvious confusion. “Isn’t that right, Jonathan?”

Jonathan shrugged, his warmness already fading. “That’s how many there were before.”

Colin opened the front door, letting a brief gust of icy wind rush through the house.

“Hello, we’re here to sit the house for the dean,” said an accented female voice from the front door. “Dean Scott Hall.”

“As are we. Here, come on inside.”

“We saw a car off the road, but the storm was so bad we hoped no one was hurt and kept driving.”

“That’s mine!” I said, raising my glass to the guest I could not yet see. “I slipped off the road and walked the rest of the way here…” I continued, trailing off as I noticed none of them paid any attention.

“Renee Dupont,” said the voice.

“Ahh, French I’m guessing?” Colin replied.

“Oui!”

“Well, I can’t see why you chose to stay here!” To which they both warmly laughed. “And who is this?”

“Oh, this is-”

“Sjur!” said a new, even more heavily accented male voice; foreign transfers.

“Could you say that again?” Colin said with a nervous laugh as the door closed.

“Sjur,” he repeated.

“Well, it’s great to meet you Sure. Please, sit down by the fire and warm up. Make yourselves acquainted,” he said, disappearing once more.

“Okay, thank you!” Renee said before they walked into the room. She was absolutely gorgeous. A head of curly dark hair draped past her shoulders, wrapping around a tight peacoat and bright red scarf; a matching red hat and lipstick, giving her the look of a beauty icon, a model, a fashionista. But there was something else about her, something wild and captivating, something simultaneously untameable and unobtainable. “And who might you be?” she said, sitting on the floor next to me, though it was not to me whom she spoke.

“Kaiser.”

“Oh! That is a special name. And, you are?” She continued until Colin returned with a platter of various cheeses, crackers, and cured meats, setting it down on the floor and handing a drink to each of our new arrivals.

“Oh! Uh… thank you,” Sjur said before immediately setting the drink aside. Sjur was a timid, quiet person, and never willingly partook in any substances. In him I recognized a sort of innocence rarely seen outside of childhood, and I wondered how it could remain intact for so long, and how long it could continue to.

“So where are you from, Sure?” Colin asked, sitting down on the arm of my chair once more.

“Norway.”

“Oh? And why’d you come to Montana?”

“Ehh, wanted to see America.”

“And what do you think of it?” Kaiser questioned while rolling his cigar back and forth between his fingers.

Sjur seemed taken aback, choking out, “It is, ehh… nice, happy. I like it very much.”

“I suppose it would be nice when you’re just visiting,” Kaiser said in a distasteful tone that left a sour note in the air.

“Well,” Renee said, breaking the silence before it lingered too long. “Why don’t we play a game?”

We spent the next half hour debating ideas until we eventually all moved down into the game room located in the basement. With a billiard table at one end and a large poker table at the other, it would have looked like a setting plucked right out of the roaring 20s if it wasn’t for the modern stereo system that stood against the far wall.

“How about a little music?” Colin said, plugging in his phone. What came out was a mixture of various instruments, all banging and clanging erratically together.

“Ugh! Change that crap, man!” Kaiser spat out while fiddling with a pool cue.

“What, don’t care for jazz much?” Jonathan replied, setting up at one end of the pool table. “Not many do nowadays,” turning to Colin.

Colin sighed and switched to a playlist of 80s hits, filling the room with the sound of Summer of ‘69. I remember we found this amusing, us being caught in a blizzard and all, and so we let it play. Kaiser and Jonathan shot pool at one end of the room, puffing on big lazy cigars while Colin lit up a spliff and played Texas hold ‘em with the rest of us. A hazy yellow fog grew around the stained glass lamps, filling the room with the skunky smell of weed and sweet tobacco.

“I fold,” Sjur said, passing the spliff from Colin to Renee.

“Oh come on Sjur, you can’t fold every hand!” Renee joked before taking a puff, exhaling a thin stream of smoke from her red lips as she passed it to me.

“Well Marcus, do you fold as well?” Colin said, twirling a lighter between his fingers.

“No, raise by three,” I said, tossing my chips into the pile before I hit the spliff.

“Fucking goddamn it!” Kaiser shouted from across the room, drawing our attention briefly.

“Can you not speak like that?” Jonathan said before making his next shot.

“Why not?”

“Because it makes you sound moronic,” Jonathan said, standing up straight and looking Kaiser in the eyes. “You sound moronic.”

I almost burst out laughing. Moronic? Who didn’t swear at least on occasion? But no matter how absurd or strange his request sounded to me, it engaged my curiosity. Who expected their friend to remain so uptight like this? And who was Jonathan Entes?

I turned back to the poker table as Colin pulled out a large vape mod and took a long, crackling hit. A white cloud plumbed from his mouth into the air before he dealt out the deck. “Anybody want another drink? I’m gonna get another drink,” he said suddenly getting up from the table.

Sjur looked at his hand. “Ehh, I don’t think I want to play anymore.”

“Oh, come on Sure! I was just starting to like you!” Colin said, while walking to the other side of the room.

“Yeah, I think I’m going to play with them,” he said, pointing over to Jonathan and Kaiser.

“Okay, have fun,” Renee said as she examined her cards.

“And do come back!” Colin said, handing Renee and myself each a fresh beer before he sat back down with a glass of whiskey. “Well, now we’re down a player,” he said, taking a drink.

There were some brief words across the room before Jonathan abruptly left and walked over to join us. “Well,” he said, tapping his cigar in the ashtray atop the table. “It’s my bet, right?” picking up Sjur’s hand. He glanced at his cards briefly before setting them down and saying, “Seven,” tossing the chips onto the table.

“Okay,” Renee said, adding seven of her own chips to the pile while chuckling.

I looked at my own cards: Jack of hearts, eight of hearts. “Alright,” I said, matching the bet.

Colin flipped up the first three cards, a jack of clubs, four of clubs, and a king of hearts.

“Raise five,” Jonathan said. “Anyway, do any of you guys know how Dean Hall got that bore skin hanging in the parlor?”

We all shook our heads as Renee matched Jonathan's raise.

Sjur and Kaisar laughed in the background as Jonathan continued, "Even though you might not believe it, he actually used the spear up there to skewer the thing."

I looked at my own hand. Was a pair of jack's really worth 12 chips? "Yeah, but hey! What do you have over there that calls for so many chips?" I said, reluctantly matching him.

Jonathan ignored me and continued, "Well, he went up there with this student of his…"

Now, I don't remember what he said right after that, as my mind lingered for a moment on Sjur and Kaiser across the room. They seemed to really be getting along, laughing more than playing their game, and looking back, I like to think that they became quite good friends.

"… But he's fine now, still holds a grudge against Dean Hall, though." Jonathan concluded.

"I fold," Colin said, flipping the next face-down card. A ten of hearts. Not immediately good, but if the last card was also hearts, I would have a pair and a flush.

"One," Jonathan said.

“Raise you to three,” Renee said. “So, Marcus, what do you study?” taking a sip from her bottle.

“Match, and sociology mostly.”

Jonathan stirred in his seat as he matched Renee’s three. “Tell me then, as a fellow sociologist, what do you think of Calhoun’s Rat Utopia?” He asked, sipping from his glass of whiskey. “As in relation to the current state of the world.”

Colin flipped the final card, king of spades. I shrugged and said, “Well, I definitely think that it’s interesting, but also think that it’s fairly flawed.”

“Oh! How so?”

“Well, for one, it was a very closed environment. I mean, in relative size, it was maybe as big as a city block. And even then he cut the experiment off before it was finished. He concluded that they would all die, but we can’t say that for sure. I mean, life always finds a way. And it’s not like they’re humans. They don’t have societies, they don’t have law, and most importantly they don’t have language; how is that supposed to be comparable to us?”

“That’s all fair and true.” Jonathan said. “But that doesn’t mean that there isn’t some truth to it. I’d argue that society is in or nearing the late stages of the experiment right now. Just take one look at the internet, all you see are activists and insane mobs, lunatics tearing down businesses and destroying government property for things as absurd as plastic straws and minimum wage. Everywhere you go you see depraved individuals,” glancing at Colin briefly. “spewing the most vile, immoral ideas, trying to teach them to children. You know, there’s an old saying I heard which goes, hard times create strong men, strong men create good times, good times create weak men, and weak men create hard times. I don’t know about you, but I think that it’s quite relevant, especially to our… spoiled generation.”

Was this a peer or my grandfather I was talking to? I knew that a lot of the people I referred to as Cufflinks leaned right politically, but I wasn’t prepared to debate someone like this. “Well, I can see that, I guess,” I said, hitting the joint again. “But who’s to say which generation is which, because as I see it, our generation simply can not be held accountable for the state of the country. I mean, we’re just entering college and the workforce now. Sure, there may be some activists that are over the top, but I’d argue that

the majority of them are right, and they simply have no other choice than to protest. And who's to say that we're the weak ones? We're the ones moving and pushing and fighting, so as I see it, maybe we're the strong ones."

"Yes, hear, hear!" Colin said, causing Sjur and Kaiser to join in, not knowing what exactly they were applauding.

By this time Jonathan had raised by ten, and Renee matched. "I fold."

Jonathan looked a bit irritated by this, leaning back in his chair and saying, "Yes, well, maybe we are, maybe we aren't. Only time will tell."

Jonathan won the hand with four kings while Renee had two pairs, jacks and tens. We played a few more hands while discussing various theories, experiments and philosophical ideas at length, ranging from the bizarre Acali Raft to the Meditations of Marcus Aurelies and Carl Jung. Once it reached about one in the morning, Sjur left us to go to bed and soon after Jonathan retired upstairs with his glass of whiskey.

At some point we stopped playing Texas hold 'em and switched to a drinking game where a deck of cards was

placed atop a shot glass and players took turns blowing them off until one person blew the last of them and took the shot, to which the game restarted and that person would go first. Renee, Colin, and I quickly found ourselves bumping around like pinballs in uncontrollable fits of laughter. I remember how funny we all found it when Kaiser not only took his first shot (by that time we each had at least four,) but took a second and a third in a row as he blew the entire deck of cards off on his first try. He laughed with us and stayed for the rest of the night, playing another dozen rounds before guiding us back to the poker table and away from the hard liquor.

“Here, try this,” Colin said, handing him a freshly lit joint as he inhaled from his vape rig. After a few hits, he passed it to me, exhaling a few small clouds into the lamp above. I just stared at it for a few minutes while hitting the joint, completely lost in thought, until Renee eventually started laughing and snatched the joint I’d been bogarting. I was so relaxed that I didn’t want to move at all. I just wanted to sit there and listen to them talk, watching and laughing with them as they carried on and only occasionally throwing in my own thoughts when relevant. Everything felt vague and fuzzy, beautifully dreamlike; and more than

once I wondered if it were in fact a dream and if I was still laying outside freezing on the side of the road.

It must have been well past three when he showed up, though what time specifically I do not recall. We all were laughing about something when we noticed him standing there in the entrance of the room. None of us knew how long he'd been there or who he was. Renee stifled a laugh and wriggled in her chair while the rest of us sat silently.

He wore a pair of heavy winter boots, a red flannel coat, and a blue Patagonia vest. With a well-built physique, a patchy beard covering his face, and a thick head of hair hiding beneath a torn Coors Light hat, he completed his rich farm boy look. "Well, howdy!" he said as he shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

"Howdy?" Renee said, still giggling. "What, have you come to chop some wood for us or something?" She said while nearly falling out of her chair, giggling hysterically as a drink dangled from her hand; and later I found that she had no memory of this interaction whatsoever.

"If need be, yeah. Y'all house sitting for the dean too?" He said, stepping cautiously into the room.

“Well, yes,” Kaiser drew out. “We hadn’t been expecting anyone else.”

Colin stirred from his chair. “Umm, want something to drink?” he said, nearly losing his balance as he got up and stumbled across the room. More than once he made trips upstairs to fetch bottles, and by now a collection of various wines, whiskeys, and beers flourished on the far coffee table.

“No thanks, I got my own actually,” the stranger said, leaving briefly to return with a backpack in his hand, out of which he pulled an opened bottle of Fireball. “I’m Matt, by the way,” he said, firmly shaking Kaiser’s hand. He sat down at the table and took a swig from the bottle, offering it to Kaiser before asking him his name. We each took turns drinking from it and introducing ourselves, and by the time it made it from Colin back to Matt, there was maybe a quarter left.

After this, we started another drinking game, which one I don’t remember. But I do remember some brief conversations about what we were studying, why we chose to go to UJR, and other rather dull speaking points. The last thing I truly remember from that night was Colin bringing

up something about owls, or ravens, or something, and Renee calling Matt out on his patchy beard, after that it all becomes a blur and impossible to recall.

When I awoke, I found myself lying on a small, exceedingly uncomfortable couch in an upstairs hallway. It took me a moment, but soon I realized just how terribly cold it was, shuddering at the sight of my own breath. Everything ached, but nothing more than my head. I got up and leaned against the wooden railing that separated the mezzanine hall from a drop off to the first floor below, and slowly started making my way to the staircase. Everything made me feel nauseous, the cedar smell of the place, the hue of the lights, even the pattern of the flooring if I looked at it for too long. I walked down through the foyer and into the kitchen, directly connected to a mudroom, inside which Jonathan and Colin stood drinking coffee.

“Morning Marcus,” Colin said passively before continuing his conversation with Jonathan.

I slunk my way into the old yet clean looking mudroom and looked up at a clock above the door leading outside. 9:37. “I feel absolutely terrible,” I rolled out.

“Here, you want some coffee,” Colin said, quickly fetching me a steaming cup.

“I think that’s the last thing I want right now.”

“No, drink it, trust me. It’ll help your headache go away,” setting the drink down on the counter next to me.

Surprisingly, it did help. I sipped at it for the next couple minutes, feeling it rush throughout my languid body, and even though my gut still felt like a churning pot, the caffeine soon freed my thoughts and numbed my brain, opening me up to conversation. I learned that roughly an hour after Matt arrived the storm got so bad that we lost power to the house. Kaiser, Matt, and I went out to turn on the backup generators, but somehow I got lost in the storm for nearly ten minutes. I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t remember any of it and could’ve died.

“Jesus,” I said. “That really happened?”

“Yeah, though you weren’t the only one to go too heavy on the booze last night,” Colin said. “Kaiser and Renee were both sick, and I doubt either will be up for hours.”

“How are you not sick?” I asked.

He laughed, saying, “Well, that’s probably because I drink more often than you,” adding a shot of whiskey to his cup of coffee, quite nearly making me gag.

I looked out the mudroom window to find the landscape completely covered in snow. It’d be impossible to get my car up here, at least today; and I was unrelieved to find that our latest arrival, Matthew Wallace, completely missed it on his way up, meaning it was either out of sight, or buried beneath the snow.

At around ten o’clock Kaiser awoke, stumbling down the steps with an enormous racket; a long and obnoxious groan issuing from the foyer staircase, announcing his arrival. Once he reached the bottom, he hesitated for a moment, throwing his hand up to feel his forehead before he lurched towards the kitchen, but as he went to enter, there was a knock at the front door.

“Here, let me get that,” I said while setting down my mug, knowing at once who it must be.

“No, no, I’ve got it,” Kaiser insisted, shifting round on his heel towards the door. He strode forward, flung it open, and suddenly stepped back in surprise. “June?”

At once, Jonathan shot up. “Kaiser? What is it? Who’s there?” he said, taking a step toward the entryway.

Kaiser didn’t answer, but a moment later he walked in, and behind him trailed a young native student. She was dressed in a black scarf, a burgundy and violet UJR hoodie (the colors of the college itself), and a pair of black yoga pants that gripped her lower half. She had a pair of sharp, interrogating eyes that could sense a lie before it was even spoken, and a blissful smile that disarmed this notion from ever occurring. In nearly every respect she fit the Cufflink stereotype, and yet she refused to fully commit to it.

“This is uhh, June. June Powell,” Kaiser said, his eyes darting between Jonathan and her before he walked over and started rummaging through the cabinets, making quite the impression. He looked terribly hungover, probably like

myself. There was a long, awkward pause as he searched for a bottle of pills, took it, and returned upstairs.

“Hello, June,” Jonathan finally said.

“Jonathan.” Her face held several emotions, surprise, anger, even a remnant of attraction perhaps, but his simply carried one, frank revulsion. The two of them stood there, eyes locked until Colin spoke up.

“So, eight of us then,” He said, leading to another bout of silence. “I’m Colin, by the way,” warmly shaking her hand, after which I introduced myself.

I was sure that it was going to be Chippy and Erin at the door, but instead it was another arrival, June. There was going to be ten of us in total, and looking around the room I could see that everyone else was just as shocked as I, if not more so. For a second I considered telling them about Chippy and Erin, but it was nothing more than a fleeting thought, and one that quickly passed.

Jonathan opened the screen door of the mudroom and let the dogs inside. Lady, whom Jonathan lovingly rubbed, was a black lab, and the other was an energetic little beagle, Remus.

“Oh, my god! Aren’t you just adorable!” June squealed, getting down to Remus’s level, to which he wagged his tail and licked her face relentlessly.

I found it funny how both Jonathan and June amused themselves with the dogs, doing everything in their power not to acknowledge the other any further. I had a feeling that whatever history lay between them, neither would bring it up or take fault, both being too stubborn to surrender or appear bothered by the other. The tension between them became too much to bear, and I didn’t bother sticking around to see who would leave first.

Even though my head no longer ached as badly, I still felt terrible. I grabbed my coat, my cup of coffee, and went outside in desperate need of fresh air. It was still cold but not unbearable, and due to the placement of the house, it was relatively windless on the back porch. I gently sipped my cup of coffee and started listening to a playlist of instrumentals, something that often helped me relax.

Within an hour, Chippy and Erin rolled up to the house. I was still on the back porch listening to my music when I heard Chippy’s voice carry from the front yard, its loud, boisterous, and jovial notes instantly recognizable. I got up

and managed to make it just in time for him to see me before they went inside.

“Marcus!” he said, outstretching his arms. “So good to see you!” embracing me as if we hadn’t seen each other in years. “Come on, let’s get inside, I’m freezing my ass off out here,” He said as Erin nudged him playfully.

“Don’t you want to get your things?” I said.

“Nah! we can get them later. By the way, where’s your car?”

“That’s a long story, I’ll tell you when we get inside,” I said, walking up the front porch and opening the door for them.

“Well, I hope it isn’t too bad,” he said as he kicked the snow off his boots. He breathed in deeply and looked around. “So, this is the place. Much better than those tiny dorm rooms, don’t you think babe?” nudging Erin back.

“Yeah, it’s gorgeous,” she replied while looking around the foyer.

“So how’d that stats final go for you?” I asked, taking his coat.

“Oh! Aced it, for sure.”

“Really!” I said, surprised.

“Hell no!” He laughed. “I think I may have got an 80, tops. Mrs. Fletcher definitely ain’t no Thomas Oakberg!”

Just then, Jonathan walked into the room. “Who are you?” he said rather bluntly, before walking up to me. “Marcus, we really shouldn’t be inviting people over. What are you doing?” trying to pull me aside.

“Wait, what? No! They were invited by the dean,” I said.

“Really?” He said. “Can I see your invitations?” turning back to Chippy and Erin while squinting his eyes.

“What?” Chippy said. “No! Why?”

“Just get them,” Jonathan said with little patience.

“But they’re out in the car!” Chippy said, motioning outside, but Jonathan only continued to stare at him. “Fine, we’ll be right back.”

Once they left, Jonathan pulled me aside. “Who are they?” he asked, and I only repeated what I said before. “Yes, but

obviously, you know them, so what are they doing here? There were only supposed to be six of us, not ten."

"Look, they got an invitation. What's the big deal?" I said. "I mean, you obviously know Kaiser and Colin, so what's the difference?"

"Well, there were only supposed to be six of us," he said. "And no, I don't know Colin, at least not that well, but Kaiser didn't show up just now, did he?"

"Okay, but June?"

"June is a different matter entirely. And frankly, I'm more shocked than you at her being here."

His words made me bite my tongue, because although I was correct, in a way, so was he. But within a moment, Chippy burst back through the door, waving the two envelopes above his head as he stormed over to Jonathan.

"See!" He said, handing them over. "Satisfied?… Come on, let's get our things," he said, tugging at Erin's arm.

By now, everyone except Kaiser and Renee was either in the room or within earshot of it. Colin walked in and stopped upon seeing Chippy and Erin, his face lighting up

as it glanced down at the invitations in Jonathan's hand, but Jonathan's face only briefly changed before it regained its composure.

"Not yet," Jonathan said. "I'm calling Dean Hall."

"What? Come on, can't that wait?" Colin pleaded. "They just got here!"

"Which is precisely why I'm doing it now. No need to waste anyone's time."

"Come on, man! What's wrong with you?" Chippy said.

Jonathan looked down at his phone, ignoring him. "Hmm," he said. "Does anyone have a phone with any signal?"

"I do," Erin said.

"Well, can I see it?" he asked, outstretching his hand.

"No," she replied sharply.

"Why not?"

"Cause it's almost dead."

"Here, it'll only take a moment," he said, stepping closer to her.

“No!” she said, stepping back next to Chippy.

“Look,” I said. “Why don’t you use the landline? Hall probably has one here.”

Jonathan turned and looked at me as if I were a small child he’d been growing increasingly annoyed of. “No Marcus, I can’t use the landline. It went down last night, remember?”

“Well then, it will just have to wait, won’t it?” I said.

“No,” Sjur said, entering the room, phone in hand. “I have a signal. Here,” he said, handing it to Jonathan.

“Thank you,” Jonathan said before he looked down at it.

We all watched as he punched in the numbers and held the phone to his ear, and for a moment, the only sound in the room was that of the phone ringing. But within another moment, a dead robotic voice came from the other end of the line saying, “I’m sorry, but the number you’ve dialed is unavailable at this moment. Goodbye,” ending the call without the option to leave a voicemail.

Jonathan looked down at the phone, dumbfounded, before handing it back to Sjur. “Go get your things,” he said to Chippy and Erin. “He didn’t answer.”

“Oh, thanks,” Chippy said sarcastically, before we went back outside.

“Nice way to make an ass of yourself,” June said to Jonathan before leaving the room.

Chippy stomped his way out of the house and down the porch, flinging the door open to his Dodge Magnum, Clarence. He pulled his and Erin’s bags out, carelessly tossing them down onto the driveway in a large, jumbled pile.

“Christian, stop it! You’re going to break something!” Erin said, grabbing his hand.

Chippy stopped, turned, and then embraced Erin. “I’m sorry babe, just got a little carried away,” kissing her on the forehead.

“Here, let me help,” I said, grabbing a few of them.

As it turned out, something had broken. A bottle of cologne cracked and soaked most of Chippy’s clothes in the overpowering scent of Definitive 12. It clung to everything. We tried washing it out, we tried airing it out, we even

tried mixing his clothes in with a load of mine, which only made both of our's smell.

We stood in the downstairs laundry room for hours trying to remove the scent from our clothing. The room was small and stuffy (which didn't help the smell), with plumbing and heating pipes hanging above our heads, clanging and whooshing with the sounds of hot water running from one end of the house to the other. Chippy was furiously scrubbing at a shirt with a toothbrush when he leaned down to take a sniff.

"Oh my god!" he said, throwing both it and the toothbrush back in the sink. "I'm convinced this shit ain't ever coming out. Ugh! And my hands stink!" He said, jerking his head back.

"Let's get some fresh air," I suggested, walking out and up the staircase.

Both of us stank. I knew this because that headache inducing scent followed us everywhere we went. The temperature dropped again, this time to negative 13, so we both bundled up before going out and around to the garage. Its exterior looked rustic and weathered, but once

we stepped inside, we found it was in pristine condition, immaculate. It was completely dark except for the bit of light coming through the windows on the right side, but that was enough to show us just how large it was. It had an upstairs loft, an adjacent workshop, and space for at least four vehicles. Colin's brand new orange Camaro sat in one corner, dirtied with mud and snow, and beside it was a black early 2010s Cadillac which belonged to Kaiser.

"Here, smell this," Chippy said, pulling a jar of bud out of his coat pocket. "Ain't that some dank shit!"

"Yeah, might help get this smell off us."

"Yeah, for sure," he said, taking out a small copper grinder. He ground up a few nuggets and before long we were smoking from a small glass pipe. "Told you it was good stuff man," He said, handing the pipe to me.

"Yeah," I said as I swayed back and forth in a comfortable haze. "I'm pretty baked already."

"Bitch ass! Not enough to refuse a second bowl though," he said, reloading the pipe. As he did, the lights in the place suddenly switched on with an electric hum.

“Power must be back,” I said. “What time is it?”

“Uhh, let me check,” he said, grabbing his phone. “4:40.”

We finished up smoking and went back inside, where we found Colin, Matt, and Sjur working on a spaghetti dinner. The aroma of tomatoes, garlic, and herbs hit us as soon as we entered the mudroom. I had hardly eaten anything all day due to my hangover, and as soon as I smelled that large gurgling pot of red sauce bubbling on the stove, with wafts of steam gently rolling off its surface, I grew instantly weak with hunger.

“What the hell are you doing!” Colin said, tearing a bottle of Italian dressing out of Matt’s hand that he’d been pouring into the sauce.

“What! It’ll add a bit of a pop to it. Trust me.”

Colin tossed the dressing back in the fridge. “No,” he said, slamming it shut. “We can put in a little wine.” He opened a bottle and poured himself a generous glass before he splashed some into the sauce.

Chippy and I ended up staying with them, helping out Sjur with the garlic bread as Colin and Matt worked on some

meatballs. While they did this, Chippy pulled out his grinder, looking at both me and Sjur as he slipped a finger over his lips and sprinkled a little of his weed into the sauce, giggling as he did.

“Dude, what the hell did you do that for!” I said in a whisper.

“Shh! Shut up man!” He said, slipping the grinder back into his pocket before the others noticed. “I got like three ounces dude! We’re good,” laughing before slapping me on the back. “Plus, they’ll never even notice it.”

After we finished with everything, Colin whipped up a quick side salad while Chippy and I set the table and called everyone to the dining room. It was mostly lit by electric lights, but in the center of the table Colin placed some candles which, when paired with the room’s dark color, gave it a very warm and intriguing atmosphere. I sat next to Chippy and to Jonathan’s left, and with Jonathan at the head of the table, he stood up and prepared to make a toast, raising his glass once Kaiser finally joined us.

“To old friends and new ones. May we serve a long and happy winter break with one another. To Dean Hall, to

good health, and to us, students of the University of Jeffrey Ross. Cheers!”

We all clanked our glasses together, most filled with the red wines Colin placed around the table, all except for Matt, who drank beer, Kaiser and Renee who still felt ill, and Sjur, who did not feel like drinking. Renee, Sjur, Colin, and I eagerly joined in, but I couldn’t help but notice the uncomfortable formality it seemingly brought to the table, the mostly silent and half-hearted “Cheers!” that lagged behind it.

Kaiser seemed practically disturbed, a distasteful scowl ensnaring his face. “May the greatest doctors in the world know of your case,” he said, causing Colin to spit out some of his drink.

Jonathan laughed this off like it was something he heard a thousand times before, but the rest of us sat still, so shocked and taken aback that no one spoke for another minute.

“Mmm, this sauce has a certain zing to it,” June said, breaking the silence. “But there’s something else too.”

“Yeah, what is that?” Renee replied. “Thyme?”

“No, no,” Jonathan said. “It’s something else… something earthy.”

Chippy turned and looked at me, his face inflated with a held laugh. It wasn’t strong, but there was a noticeable pungency to the sauce that had likely been provided by his choice ingredient. Once we finished dinner, Colin picked up our plates and left into the kitchen, soon returning with several tubs of ice cream.

“Oh, no thank you,” Renee said. “I don’t think I could eat that right now, even if I wanted to.”

He complied and dished out bowls to everyone else, passing them around the table until everyone who wanted some had it. Several discussions floated around, mostly of things like outdoor activities, hunting, fishing trips, and snow sports.

“You’ve really never went?” Matt said, baffled.

“Nope,” I said. “I’ve lived in Montana all my life and never once went snowboarding or skiing.”

“Wow,” he said, shoveling a generous spoonful of strawberry ice cream into his mouth. “Well, you really

should go. Bridger Bowl is bound to be terrific this season. Has anyone else never been?" he asked, scooping up another spoonful.

"I haven't," Renee said. "At least not in a long time."

"Well, we should. We should all try to get out and go sometime. It'd be fun," Matt said, pushing his bowl aside as he leaned back in his chair.

"So, where are you from June?" Kaiser asked as Jonathan lit up an old, weathered tobacco pipe.

"I'm from Hunting, you know that," she said, taking a pinch of dip from Matt.

"No, I didn't," he said as Jonathan smirked and June rolled her eyes.

"So you got to see the city really grow and expand then," Colin said, packing a box of cigarettes on his palm.

"Yeah, up until a few years ago it was small and quiet, then boom! People from all over the country and the world started coming."

“Yeah, UJR really seems to be doing well, same can’t be said for Charlie Russel U sadly,” I said, putting a mint-flavored Zyn into my mouth. “Two thirds of their dorms were empty last year.”

“That’s terrible,” Renee said, taking one of Colin’s Turkish blend Camels.

“Yeah, even before they cut their programs they’d been struggling to keep up with UJR, but now they’re really behind.”

“So where in Montana do you hail from, Marcus?” Jonathan said.

“Great Falls.”

“Really!” He said, pulling his pipe from his mouth. “Betrayed old Charlie Russel for the Elks?”

“Well, I didn’t mean to, really. I actually took my first couple of semesters there. But since they no longer offered criminology as a major, I transferred here.”

“I thought you said you were studying sociology?” He said, looking at me inquisitively.

“Well, that’s what most of my classes are,” I said.

“Ahh, I see,” he said, puffing on his pipe. “And how are you liking it?”

“I enjoy it quite a lot, actually,” I said. “Though I feel that after about three or four classes, it’s mostly the same. Once you know the main schools of thought, sociologists, and social experiments that have been conducted-”

“There’s not much more that needs to be known,” he said.

“I guess so, yeah. I mean, my last three classes I passed without needing to look at my textbooks more than twice. One of them I didn’t even buy the book for, and I did just fine using online resources and the studies provided by my teacher.”

“Did they know you didn’t have the book?” he asked.

This question confused me. “Umm, no?” I laughed out.

He laughed too, almost a bit too much as he tapped out his pipe into an ashtray. “No. Of course they didn’t know,” repacking the pipe and placing it into his mouth. “It was a stupid question.” He lit it with a match and puffed on it

hard for a minute before it started to burn consistently. “So what are you minoring in then, Marcus?”

“Fine arts, drawing actually.”

“Really? Old Charlie Russel must be pretty bummed about that,” he said, letting a small cloud roll out between his words. “Why don’t you major in it?”

“Well, I’d love to, but as I see it, I don’t want to teach art, and I can do just fine as an artist without majoring. I’ve met too many people working dead-end jobs because they majored in the arts.”

“Well,” he said, holding his pipe with both hands. “Sometimes you should take a risk. If that’s what you love, that’s what you should do.”

I always hated when people like him told me this, even though I knew they were only trying to encourage me. “Well, I can’t afford to take that risk,” I said. “It is what I want to do, but if I don’t become a successful artist, then I’d have nothing to show for my years at college. Plus, I do enjoy criminology, just not as much.” This left us in a long, lingering silence; the voices of our compatriots only making

it more unbearable. “So you’re studying sociology, right? What else?”

“I’m actually triple majoring,” he said rather smugly. “sociology, psychology, and philosophy.”

“Oh, nice. I took some intro psych and philosophy classes at CRU, and a few at UJR.”

“Nice,” He said with dying enthusiasm.

“Yeah, I’ve actually been wanting to take some more philosophy classes. It’s always interested me.”

“Oh, what about it?” he said, like that was an easily answered question.

“I don’t really know,” I said. “Just finding out what different people’s takes on life are I guess. How they think we should behave, how we should live, and how they think.”

“Hmm, so you’re looking for a guide to follow through life then?”

“No, not really,” I said, not really understanding what he meant. “I just like to explore different ideas, I suppose.”

“So you mean to wander around aimlessly then? Kicking around different ideas but never attaching yourself to any of them? Never following them?”

“I didn’t say that,” now getting a bit irritated. “I never said I wouldn’t follow certain ideas or teachings. I just don’t like to act like I know where I’m going when I don’t.”

Our conversation died after that. We tried talking with the others when we could but nothing really stuck, and soon I called it a night and went upstairs.

I was to be staying in a room with Colin on the third floor. It was only about seven feet tall but was well furnished, and gave off a very cozy atmosphere with its golden oak interior. A small desk stood next to my bed on the left side of the room, on top of which sat a green banker’s lamp and a stack of ancient encyclopedias, most over 30 years old. Colin already unpacked (rather messily I might add), and on his side stood a rickety shelf of miscellaneous books with his bright yellow snowboard leaning against it, along with, oddly enough, an orange Fender electric bass and it’s accompanying amplifier. I looked down at my small twin bed, and with an exhausted body and swirling head, I threw

myself onto it; the springs making an inevitable twang as I did; and soon I fell asleep.

Three.

On the fourth day, the weather finally cleared up enough for Matt and I to go searching for my car. We set out in his truck, a newer one kitted out with a lift, a set of overhead lights, and an assortment of Trump and NRA stickers. At first I was surprised he could afford such a vehicle, that was until I learned his parents got it for him.

“Yeah, it runs good,” he said, loading his lip full of tobacco. “But I want to get a Chevy here soon. This one just doesn’t quite suit me as well as I’d like it.”

Something about this didn’t sit right with me. I didn’t understand why he felt the need for something newer. It barely had 50,000 miles, and as far as I could tell, nothing was wrong with it. But once we got on the road and started searching for my car, this thought quickly left my mind.

It didn’t take long to find, as I vaguely remembered where it was. Only its dark gray backend and red tail lights were visible, everything else being swept over by snow. Within a couple of minutes, Matt and I had attached a chain from his truck to the back end of it and pulled it back out onto the road. Surprisingly, it didn’t need a jump, but as it started

warming up, I couldn't help but notice the terrible squeaking coming from under the hood; and once I put it into drive, the transmission jolted, dragging for a second before it picked up momentum and sprung forward. The entire drive back up I clenched the steering wheel with locked arms. More than once I had to plow through a patch of deep snow, causing me to slow to a crawl, or worse, loosely slide around the road towards the sheer rock face of the mountain or the heavily wooded drop off below. But after about twenty minutes of agonizing driving, we were back up at the house and unloading my things.

"Is this your ride?" Kaiser said, stepping outside as we finished unloading it.

"Yes," I said, taking the last of my luggage out and carrying it up the front steps.

"Looks like it's seen better days, but those things are marvels of engineering, aren't they?" He said, while staring at it thoughtfully from the porch. "You know, I almost got one, but I settled on a Cadillac," he said, walking down and patting the hood of it. "What year is it? O six?"

"O two actually."

“Hmm, well, if the weather warms up enough we should go driving some time. You, me, and Colin. See who has the superb ride. Don’t you agree?”

“Well,” I said. “Compared to you guys’, mine’s an antique.”

“Ehh, it’ll still be fun,” he said. “I mean, both me and Colin’s rides are domestic. Even if yours is older, it’ll make for some variety.”

“Yeah, maybe. Sounds like fun,” I said, but in reality I had little desire to. I felt embarrassed by the condition of my car compared to theirs, and even though I felt Kaiser was genuinely trying to reach out, I couldn’t help but feel like it was also a way for him to assert dominance.

I made my way through the front door and placed my bags in the foyer before going back out to park my car in one of the remaining spots in the garage. When I got back inside the house, Colin and I carried my things up to our room where we were pleasantly surprised to find a handwritten note taped to the door.

Snowball Fight!

Out front Tonight at 7PM

Be there or be square!

-Chippy and Erin

“Hey, what’s that?” Colin asked, taking the note down to examine it. He gently sat my bags down before silently opening the door, looking at the note as he held it open. “You think you’re going to get in on this?”

“Thanks, and yeah, I think so,” I said. “What about you?”

He walked over and sat the note down on the desk before throwing himself onto his bed. “Yeah, probably. No reason not to.” He lit a cigarette and placed it in his mouth before he picked up his bass and began plucking at it, but only a few seconds later, he sat it back down and took a long drag from his smoke. He sat there, the smoke passing between his lips and floating back up into his nostrils as he stared at me, or into me.

“What is it?”

“I’m sorry, I’ve been meaning to ask this, but… have we met before?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” I said.

“Hmm, it’s just, you look awfully familiar,” he said before taking another drag from his smoke. “You aren’t in the Rathminston or Founders’ club, are you?”

“No.”

“Oh, hmm,” he said. “I just know Kaiser and Jonathan are in both, and I believe I may have seen June with the Raths before, but can’t be sure. I don’t know, I just swear I’ve seen you before.”

“Beats me.”

“Part of a frat? Been to any parties?”

“No, and no, not really,” I said, now getting a bit irritated. All of his questions just reminded me of how much of the college experience I had been missing out on. I wasn’t in any clubs, I didn’t take part in any sports or activities, and I certainly wasn’t a member of a frat. Hell, I didn’t really have any friends at UJR besides Chippy. I hadn’t been doing anything beyond merely existing for the past year, and I hated that. “I’ve been too busy with school, I guess.”

“Well, I’m sure I’ve seen you somewhere now. I’ll find out where, you can be sure of that.” He picked up the bass and

began plucking at it once more as the cigarette dangled from his pursed lips. “Have you seen Whiplash?” he asked.

“With J.K Simmons?”

“Yeah!” he said, perking up.

“Nope, haven’t seen it. But I’ve seen clips of it online.”

“Oh,” he mumbled. “That’s too bad. It’s really good. We should watch it sometime soon.”

I stayed there in that room for several hours, unpacking my things and settling in until, at about four o’clock, I looked out the small window and saw Chippy, Erin, and Matt out in the front yard. After spending all afternoon in that cramped, shallow room, I felt like joining them and getting some fresh air, and thus grabbed my coat, hat, and boots, and headed out.

“No, no, not like that!” Chippy said. “You’ve got to give it some finesse, finesse!”

“Oh, hey Marcus,” Matt said, noticing me shut the front door.

“Marcus!” Chippy called. “Get your ass over here!”

“Alright,” I said, jogging down the steps and over to them. What they had managed so far was a sad pile, four lopsided mounds of snow, all poorly arranged with no discernible pattern or reason. “So, this is… a fort?”

Chippy laughed out. “Well, that’s what it’s supposed to be. Doesn’t look much like one, does it?”

“No,” I said. “No, it doesn’t. But give us 20 minutes and this thing will be The Alamo.”

“Bitch ass!” he said. “Come on, let’s get this thing going!” clapping his hands together energetically.

We went to work rolling gigantic snowballs, stacking them on top of each other, and packing them together with more snow. Within an hour, we were joined by Renee and Sjur, and within an hour of that, we had constructed something our childhood selves would’ve been proud of. It consisted of three walls forming a U shape, at each corner of which stood a six foot tall column of packed snow and ice that resembled a tower.

Once finished, we were all completely exhausted, and sweat poured from my brow as my arms shook. We went up and sat on the front porch to gaze at it from a distance,

sipping at cups of reheated coffee with jittering hands. A light powdering of snow fell from the few stray clouds that drifted overhead as the sun started to set behind the trees. It cast its last rays of light through the snowflakes, causing them to glow like little incandescent lights as the sky was painted in vibrant hues of orange, purple, blue, and gold.

“Isn’t it beautiful, babe?” Chippy said, leaning his head against Erin.

“Mm-hm,” she murmured. “I don’t remember the last time I saw a sunset so beautiful.”

“No! The fort!” Chippy laughed. “But yes, the sunset is beautiful too.” Kissing her on the head before turning back to watch the sun disappear.

I turned and looked out as well, breathing in deeply. I was filled with a rush of different emotions, joy, laughter, awe, wonder, but most important and intense among them was the overwhelming sense of freedom that came over me, and that I craved for so long. We were truly free and alone. I didn’t care about school, or classes, or money problems, or anything other than that moment there at that house. Here I was and here we were out in the vast great wilderness,

free to do and live as we pleased, for who or what could bother us here?

After a light dinner and a few drinks, most of us went back outside. By this time it was already dark out, and the only light was that of the stars, the moon, and those mounted to the porch, stretching a warm, tangerine glow across the yard and fort. Chippy and Erin went down and started filling the fort with snowballs, while Sjur, Renee, Matt, and I remained on the porch. June soon came out as well, and joined Chippy and Erin in the fort. I stood, leaning against the railing as I watched from the background and smoked a cigarette.

“Psst! Marcus. Marcus!” Chippy called from within the fort.

“What?” I called back, to which he just waved me over. “What is it?” After waiting a moment for an answer which did not come, I reluctantly slunk down to see what he wanted. I made it about ten feet from the porch when he peeked his head out. “What is it?” I repeated, and suddenly he leapt up and threw a snowball that hit me in the shoulder.

“Oop!” he said, before bursting into laughter.

“You son of a bitch,” I said, laughing as I quickly packed my own and hurled it at him.

“Oh, ho!” He exclaimed, hopping up and down. “It’s on!”

Chippy, Erin, and June all began chucking and tossing snowballs from within the fort, many of which hit me, but several others hit the porch and those who stood there. Matt was the first to join in, but he ran straight past me and clear over into the fort.

“Hey, where are you going?” I said, before he dove inside, where he proceeded to join Chippy and the rest of them in assaulting the porch and myself. “What is this?” I yelled to Chippy, who laughed and promptly threw another snowball in my direction. “Jesus Christ! I got the entire firing squad on me!” I shouted before ducking behind a tree.

Within a few moments, Sjur and Renee joined me, fanning out across the front yard, but without numbers or any good cover to hide behind, we ended up receiving most of the beating.

“Oh fuck,” Renee said in a way that made me chuckle as she ran behind the tree with me, her smile and light laugh

stunning me for a moment as I captured an image of her face against the falling snow.

Sjur, now alone and exposed, jogged around the front yard, mumbling as he dodged and batted away several snowballs, and was hit with many more. “Shippy!” he yelled. “Shippy stop!”

“No!” Chippy responded, throwing another.

As this happened, I gathered a small pile into my arms before saying to Renee, “Watch this,” and darted out from behind the tree. I ran out behind the fort, dodging several of the others snowballs before returning fire with my own, but instead of hitting their mark, most flew harmlessly overhead.

“Ass, ass, assin ass, ass!” Chippy taunted until the last one hit him in the face and shut his mouth. Chippy bent down and grabbed a snowball, rearing his arm back to throw it when the front door opened, and out walked Kaiser, Jonathan, and Colin.

We all just stood sort of dazed for a moment as they each got their preferred method of smoking and lit up. Jonathan stood gazing out off the porch while puffing on a long

slender cigar, doing everything in his power to avoid looking at us. Kaiser and Colin stood behind him, conversing over some cigarettes, and just when I thought they wouldn't join in, someone absolutely pelted Jonathan in the face, causing him to drop his cigar on the snow covered porch. Chippy struggled to stifle his laughter as Jonathan slowly bent down and picked up his cigar, brushing it off and placing it in his overcoat pocket before removing his glasses to wipe them down, at which Chippy finally burst. After a few moments of rubbing and breathing on them, he sat them down on the porch railing and swiftly scooped up a handful of snow, packed it, and threw it at Chippy. "You aren't getting away with that!" he shouted, running down the steps and scooping up another.

"Oh, shit!" Chippy yelped before getting pummeled by one of my own. "Oof, Marcus you ass!" He said, turning to me and returning fire.

Kaiser quickly jumped down from the porch, sliding his way to the yard before he broke into a sprint and charged into the fort, tackling one of the towers down on top of Matt, laughing as he did. "Shit, you okay?" he said after a moment, helping Matt up before being lobbed in the back

of the neck with a snowball from Renee. Kaiser decided to then join team fort, leaving Colin and Jonathan out with us.

“Kaiser! Get back here!” Jonathan said, chucking a snowball inside.

Colin still stood on the porch, too preoccupied with lighting a fresh cigarette to notice that Kaiser and Jonathan left him. Once he did notice and looked around, he threw his new cigarette to the ground and ran out towards Sjur, shouting and hopping around like a drunken leprechaun. “Sjur! Sjur get up!” He shouted, pulling at Sjur who was currently lying face down in the snow.

We carried on fighting until most of us tired out, and before long, we stumbled our way back up to the porch and caught our breath. Colin fumbled with the doorknob before letting himself in and the dogs out. They ran about, hopping and barking at the falling snowflakes before the still energetic Chippy began chasing them around the front yard, tossing snowballs and rolling around like he was one of them.

“Hey Marcus. You think you could help me with these?” Colin said, peeking his head out the front door.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, getting up and following him inside.

We went into the kitchen where I found two bottles of brut and half a dozen cans of Guinness strewn across the small table.

“What’s this all for?” I asked, inspecting one of the bottles.

“For drinking,” he said, grabbing champagne flutes out of the cabinet before realizing there weren’t nearly enough, and thus started pulling wine glasses.

“Well, I know that. But what are you making?”

“Black velvets,” he said. “But I feel like that name can be kind of confusing because there’s also a whiskey named Black Velvet, so I call them black and tans,” cracking open and pouring Guinness into all the glasses until they were about half full. “Here, can you pass me a towel,” he said while untwisting one of the bottles of champagne.

“Yeah, here,” I said, handing him one.

“Ah, thanks!” he said, taking the towel from me and wrapping it around the top of the bottle. “You see, there’s a way to do this which makes the cork not pop, but I haven’t quite figured it out yet.” After about a minute or so of him slowly twisting and turning the bottle, there was a sudden

pop. “Damn it!” he said, putting the bottle down on the table. “Here, you try,” handing me the second bottle and towel before he began pouring the first.

I tried twisting it off silently as well, but my attempt ended even worse than his. It popped loudly, shooting champagne before it fizzled out through the towel into my hands and on the floor. I laughed, “Well, shit,” I said, pouring some into the glasses before it could spill any more.

Once we finished the drinks, we brought them out, only to find that most everyone started in on some beers brought out by Matt.

“Here, I’ll take one of those,” Kaiser said, setting down his beer.

“Oh, me too!” Renee said, taking one and sipping it slowly.

Matt, Chippy, Erin, and June all stuck to their beers, and while one was offered to Sjur, he did little more than hold it between his hands, leaving the rest of us with a surplus of drinks to guide our conversation.

By eleven most everyone had gone inside, all except Jonathan, Chippy, Colin, and myself. It had grown to be

bitter cold out over the last few hours, but for whatever reason, we stayed out there on the front porch. We brewed a new batch of coffee, and when paired with the blankets and bourbon, it did a fine job of keeping winter's bite at bay. It was so quiet out. The only sounds were that of the wind occasionally stirring through the trees, and our voices being carried off the porch, echoing deep into the night. Colin sat on the steps with Chippy while I leaned against a post, and Jonathan sat further away, lazily swaying back and forth on an old rocker.

"So where have you been, Chippy?" Colin asked while sipping on some coffee.

"Yes, Chippy, where have you been?" Jonathan repeated, rolling his cigar between his fingers. "Moreover, where are you from? I'm curious."

Chippy laughed a little nervously. "Well," he started. "I was born in New Mexico, but we moved to California when I was real little, and to be honest, I don't remember much before then."

"Done any traveling?" Jonathan probed.

Chippy rubbed his hands against his thighs before pouring a shot of 1889. “Well, my family traveled the Americas, and last winter me and Erin went up to Iceland for Christmas.”

“Iceland, really!” Jonathan said before leaning back in the rocker. “Kaiser and I went fly-fishing there, oh, must have been three years ago. They have some tremendous spots. I swear we were up there for a month and never once fished in the same place. Ahh,” he said, leaning back, recalling the trip fondly. “We’ve traveled across Europe, New Zealand, Russia, Alaska, and Cuba together, all great places, but personally, none have topped Iceland.”

“Really!” I said, both shocked by and jealous of his roster. “So, how often do you go on these trips?”

“As often as Kaiser’s parents will pay for,” he said rather nonchalantly.

“Well, his parents must be pretty nice then,” I said.

“Wouldn’t know, haven’t met them,” he said, swirling his glass before taking a sip.

“Really?” I said, now quite shocked. “How long have you guys been friends?”

“A little over ten years.”

“And you’ve never met his parents?”

“Nope,” he said, finishing his drink. “Not once. He lives at his grandparent’s house for the most part, a nice little place in New Hampshire. His parents sent him to the U.S. when he was young, maybe six, but I’m not sure when exactly. I learned early on not to ask about them or his early life too much. He only sees them about once a year and I don’t think they get along well. He’s always back early and upset.” He got up and grabbed the whiskey next to Chippy, asking me where I had traveled before any sort of awkward silence settled.

Well, I say this, but an awkward silence did settle, though it wasn’t anyone’s fault but my own. I felt embarrassed. I thought about lying, but before I could think of anything, I spilled the truth. “I haven’t really traveled anywhere,” I finally mumbled out.

“Well, it doesn’t have to be another country or overseas or anything,” Chippy said after a moment. “Not everyone is as privileged as Jonathan here,” and Jonathan smirked.

“Well,” I started. “My parents took me to the Canadian International Peace Garden when I was little. I don’t really remember much of it, though.”

“Oh… nice,” Chippy said while nodding his head. “Did they take you anywhere else?”

“No, not really. My dad took me to Glacier and Yellowstone a few times, but we haven’t really traveled much since… since the Peace Garden.” I felt small, ashamed. A pit opened up inside me, threatening to drag me down and swallow me in my inferiority, my envy, and my grief and guilt for my mother’s death.

“Oh,” He said before a new moment of silence arose. “So where have you been, Colin?”

Colin told us about his trips to France, the UK, and the Caribbean islands with his parents. He seemed to be on good terms with them as they went on a trip every summer, each place somewhere new and exotic. The wind began to stir up tremendously as he spoke, eventually forcing us to migrate to the warmth of the indoors, though not before shivering and holding onto our blankets for at least ten minutes longer.

By the time we did make it inside, we were all shaking and sniffling noses that shuffled into the parlor, half drunk and half frozen before warming up by the fireplace with hot drinks, good conversation, and the always enraptured dogs for company. Lady sat at Jonathan's feet, enjoying his attention and firm pattings while Remus wandered around between the rest of us, eventually settling at a spot between me and Chippy on the floor.

"Ahh," Chippy said, sprawling out with a fresh bottle in his hand. "So, Colin, where are you from then? I don't think you mentioned that," taking a long swig.

"Ohio, or at least I was there till I was about eleven. After that we moved around alot until we settled down in Washington." He said while his hands fidgeted with a lighter, trying to light a smoke.

"Oh, so why'd you move?" Chippy said. "Parents were in the military or something?"

Colin shifted around a bit, still unable to light his cigarette. "Uhh, well, it was my dad mostly," he said, furiously playing with the lighter before finally getting a spark. He lit

the cigarette right as Kaiser quite unexpectedly joined us and Remus ran up to greet him.

“Did he just not like it there anymore, or did he change jobs or something?”

Colin pulled a hasty drag from his smoke. “Umm, yeah, something like that you could say… Kaiser! How are you doing? Couldn’t sleep?” he said, getting up from his chair. “Here, I’ll get you something to drink. Anything else want anybody?” leaving before I or anyone else could answer.

Kaiser strode in and leaned against the fireplace, pulling a half-smoked cigar out of his pocket before lighting it up. A few jets of smoke left his mouth before he removed it, satisfied with its glowing ember. Remus jumped up and down next to him, wagging his tail erratically, begging for his attention. Kaiser complied, rubbing him vigorously on the head before asking me, of all things, my opinion on Nietzsche, specifically the three metamorphoses of the ubermensch; and Jonathan gave me a look as if to say I need not answer.

“Umm, I don’t know,” I said before giving way to nervous laughter. “I’d have to refresh myself and come back to you later on that.”

“Okay,” Kaiser said in a low, somber tone. “I’ve just been thinking about it alot lately and couldn’t sleep, so it was kind of on my mind a bit.” He walked over to a chair in the corner of the room and sat down, Remus happily bounding up to lie upon his lap. He sat there puffing on his cigar and petting Remus for the rest of the night, staying silent for the most part, just staring into the flickering flames of the fireplace.

Morning came sooner than we thought, bringing most everyone downstairs as the sun drifted through closed curtains in loose golden beams. It was the simple things that carried my attention most, a tea kettle simmering on the stovetop, the electric buzz of a toaster, the ticking of the old clock hanging above the screen door, and the sudden shuffling of my comrades feet. In fact, I had barely

enough time to finish my English muffin before I was drug along by Jonathan, Matt, and Kaiser. Jonathan had an old breakover shotgun slung over his shoulder while Matt sported a much newer one. I didn't know what was going on as I must have either dozed off during the night or been left out of some conversation.

"C'mon Lady, Remus, let's go," Jonathan said, whistling to them to follow.

Kaiser quickly strode by with a large leather side bag hanging from his shoulder. "Hurry up guys, we don't have much time," he said while quickly lighting a cigarette he got from Colin before heading out.

"It shouldn't matter too much!" Matt said, following him with the screen door slamming shut behind.

Jonathan stood in the kitchen with an apple as the two dogs followed him around attentively. "Hurry up Marcus, we haven't got all day," He said, rushing out with the dogs barking behind him.

"Alright, be right there!" I said as I ran upstairs to grab my overcoat.

“Shit man, what’s going on?” called Chippy from the second floor.

“I’m not sure, just grabbing my coat!” I said, rushing past him and up the next flight of stairs.

Once I returned to the ground floor, I found Chippy throwing on his own plaid winter coat and matching bomber hat.

“Where are you going?” Erin murmured, still waking up and rubbing her eyes.

Chippy placed both hands around her neck and kissed her gently on the forehead. “We’ll be back soon babe, just going outside for a bit,” he said before kissing her once more and leaving with me outside.

We found the others standing near the edge of the forest. Snow crunched and squeaked beneath our shoes and all around us songbirds chirped, perched from the snow covered roof of the house, the clotheslines, and an old rickety woodshed tucked away just along the treeline. A bright morning sun cast its light all around, causing everything to glow vividly with the snow, like how you

might imagine the clouds of heaven or the peaks of Mount Olympus in all their pure and divine glory.

Jonathan stood still, his thick overcoat just caressing the drifts of the snow. Biting into his apple, he stepped forward, slung his shotgun over his arm, and whistled to the dogs. We all slunk forward and followed him into the evergreens as the dogs ran around, occasionally stopping to bark, observe, or listen to things we ourselves could not yet perceive.

“So, what are we doing?” Chippy asked, hands lodged deep into his coat pockets.

“Shh!” Kaiser hushed, turning around to show us a finger over his lips. “Shut up!”

“We’re upland bird hunting,” Matt said, walking closer to us. “I don’t know if we’ll find anything up here, though.”

“Well shit man, I don’t have a hunting license!” Chippy exclaimed.

“Shut the fuck up!” Kaiser shouted back, being far louder than us in the process.

“Doesn’t matter,” Matt whispered. “I have mine, so if you get anything and by some off chance a ranger shows up we’ll just say that I got it.” He pulled a can of chew from his Patagonia vest and packed a lip full. “But I doubt we’ll be seeing any rangers up here today.”

Everything felt hazy as the trees stirred overhead, rustled by a wind that could only be seen and heard. We had only been walking for about ten minutes, but I could already feel my arms and legs shaking desperately from the lack of sleep and the cold. With everyone quiet, my ears adapted and picked up on sounds I would have normally missed: the trees’ creaking timbers, Matt’s occasional spitting that marked our path with brown globs in the snow, the dogs’ sniffing and short whimpers, their paws patting against the ground, Jonathan loading shells into his gun, its swift snap shut, something rustling in the foliage, a bark, a flutter, and then a deafening thunderous shot. A plume of feathers exploded in the distance before there was a loud thud. Remus ran up about thirty yards to where the bird had fallen and proceeded to parade the kill around as his own.

“Remus!” Jonathan called, followed by a short whistle. “Here boy.” But the dog ignored him.

“What is it? What did you get?” Matt asked as the dog got closer. “Shit man! That don’t look like no quail.”

The dog kept its distance from us, insisting that it was his own to keep, but the closer we got, the more we realized Matt was right and it was not a quail that Jonathan shot.

Kaiser finally got ahold of Remus. “Give me that!” He said sternly as he freed the bird from his jaws. He stood there staring at the tiny gray and white bird. “Jonathan, come here,” He called as we walked up. “Jonathan, it’s an owl,” showing us the small screech before handing it to Jonathan, who looked at it and said nothing.

“Shit man! You killed an owl! Dude…” Chippy let out while holding his hands behind his head.

“Shut up,” Jonathan snapped. “It was an accident. What was it doing down on the ground and at this time of day? It must be sick,” he said, tossing it carelessly into a nearby shrub.

“Well, it isn’t sick anymore,” Chippy said.

We moved on, but I never really got past that. I don’t know why, but something about killing an owl felt wrong, even if

it had been a mistake. It felt…sacrilegious. Jonathan went on to get a quail, but not before Kaiser shot two himself. Matt got one as well, the largest of the four, something Kaiser was at first apprehensive about agreeing with, but later even praised Matt for.

“Who needs a Christmas turkey when you got a quail this big!” Kaiser said, slapping him on the back.

Before we went inside, Matt insisted it was mine and Chippy’s turn to shoot something, handing his shotgun to Chippy and asking Jonathan to hand his own to me. It felt heavy, and it’s trigger cold against my bare finger.

“No, keep your finger off till you’re ready to shoot,” Kaiser said in a sharp tone, moving my finger from its previous placement.

I held the gun as we journeyed back to the house, and when it became apparent that there was no more hunting to be had, Matt insisted we at least shoot the guns once, joking that it was bad luck to not clear them of their last rounds. I shot it at an old rusted through bucket that had been sitting outside, likely for years. The gun recoiled in my hands, and since I held a rather slouched stance and

hadn’t prepared myself, it kicked me firmly in the shoulder. The pellets produced a loud clang when they hit their mark, sending the bucket flying several feet as a sharp pain shot through my shoulder, where it remained sore for the next few days.

That night, we tried cooking one of the quails, but it turned out terribly. The kitchen filled with smoke and the thing ended up smelling more like a burnt corpse than a freshly cooked bird. The taste was terrible too, and although it was as tough as a shower shoe, none of this was enough to stop Kaiser from eating it.

“Kaiser, stop. It’s disgusting,” Colin said before clearing his pallet.

“I don’t see what you guys’ problem with it is,” he said.

“Come on, stop. You’re going to make me sick,” Chippy joked, making a gagging sound as Jonathan set down his fork, taking only a single bite of the blistered bird before he lit up his pipe.

“It tastes fine,” He pressed with an expression that hardly reflected his words. “In fact, I may even have more.” To which we all groaned.

Once the weather permitted it, June, Sjur, Renee, and I took a drive with Matt to restock the pantry. It was early morning, maybe seven o’clock when we departed. The truck shook about as we made our way down the mountainside, knocking my head against the glass as the tires crunched through pits of muddy ice and packed snow drifts. The sun scattered its rays in every direction, blinding me with its shearing light no matter where I looked. Usually, any of these would have been enough to rouse me, but over the past couple days my sleep schedule veered towards that vague abstraction of the night shift, leaving me in a nearly constant state of restlessness, where only brief spurts of consciousness broke through the otherwise fuzzy landscape of the near dream. I sat in the back with Renee and Sjur while June sat up front with Matt, laughing and playing the most obnoxious country music imaginable. For most of the drive, I merely looked out the window as Renee and Sjur talked back and forth, gazing out at the tall pines that carried the dust of the gods

and swayed with their every breath. But at other times I'd find myself fixed upon her, Renee, staring as I imagined her somewhere on a French beach, smiling through shopping floor windows, or lying back in a rowboat at autumn's first call. Every detail about her was so intrinsically beautiful, such a sublime definition of beauty itself that it cast me to wonder. Could this have been the face stolen by Paris, to have launched a thousand ships, usher the siege of Troy, the death of Patroclus, Hector, and Achilles? Maybe not, but something about her told me it had been.

At the very edge of the Adle mountains sat Leon, a quiet little town that proudly displayed its name on a large wooden sign, impossible to miss. It was built entirely around one central road, and like a main artery, had narrower streets branching off for housing, schools, and such. A rusty old gas station was the first building to greet you, hunched over, slouched, and dilapidated; I wondered if it was even in operation when I first saw it. Several other businesses followed, a general goods store, an outdoors shop that had closed for the winter, and a grimy-looking cafe (Eddie's Corner Griddle,) that appeared synonymous with food poisoning and gave off a general unsanitary vibe. One place that looked rather welcoming was the local bar,

a rustic building styled like a cabin or some old trapper's hideout, with various skulls and trophies mounted above the doorway. At the very end of the road stood the town church, small and secluded, looking like it could hardly hold more than fifty people and only saw about ten regularly.

The truck shook and squealed to an abrupt halt as we pulled up to the general goods store, causing me to hit my head one last time.

"Merde!" Renee said before she scooched and jumped out of the truck. "You haven't given yourself a concussion, have you?"

I laughed. "Well, maybe," I said. "I mean, I hardly remember any of the drive down here."

She stood still, her short dark hair gently swaying as she faced the wind and looked around. "Huh," she said, letting a tight breath of air hang out in front of her. "What a pleasant little town."

I found it charming myself, in its own pastoral, back-country sort of way. Every building was old, most from about the 60s, but none later than the 90s. Rows of tiny,

quaint houses lay within view, some well kept and practically gleaming while others lay abandoned with flaking paint, broken windows, and crumbling foundations.

We spent the next twenty minutes or so poking around the general goods store. The place was decorated in everything from antique guns and native American tools, to old photos from college football and hunting trips, all the way to multiple pieces of original Star Wars memorabilia and a poster from the Philosopher's Stone that had been signed by JK Rowling, proudly displayed behind the register. The store itself wasn't that big, with only enough room for a few isles of canned goods and camping supplies, but attached to it were several newer additions, including a gift shop, a munitions store, a small space set out for wines, liquors, and beer (mostly beer,) and even a section full of movie rentals.

"Look at this!" Matt said, pointing out the movie selection. "Big Trouble in Little China, Judge Dredd, and look, 10,000 BC. I barely remember when that came out."

While Renee and I looked over the alcohol, Sjur wandered around with Matt and June, who quickly moved on to look at the guns.

“What should we get?” Renee asked me as we looked over the wines.

I looked over the bottles. They didn’t have a huge selection, but enough to make you think. “I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe a zinfandel?”

Matt walked over after getting something from the munitions counter, bumping into me as he reached inside the beer cabinet. “I’m getting some PBRs. Oh, get that five dollar one!” he said, pointing out a bottle on the bottom shelf with a beaming smile.

“Why?” I asked while pointing out a different bottle to Renee.

“Cause it’s five dollars. How bad could it be?”

I looked at it. Nevada’s Best. “I mean yeah, how bad can it be,” I said, grabbing the bottle while Renee picked up a different one and winked at me.

As it turned out, it could be quite bad. After we loaded up the truck, we drove back to the house on that rough, unforgiving road. I looked out the window as bottles clanked and shoulders rubbed together, and all I could

think about was how a week had already passed and the end of winter break was now that much closer. I didn't want it to end, and part of me wished we could have just kept driving up that mountain, lost in the oblivion of time as forests and winter waves rolled by, their only request being that we acknowledge them, a simple task, but one that can easily go unfulfilled when stuck on thoughts of comfort, lost in the lull of one's own mind.

Upon reaching the house, we found Chippy out in the front yard, frolicking with the dogs while Erin sat huddled up with a blanket and cup of cocoa in the rocker on the porch. Remus and Lady barked and hopped around him excitedly, jumping up and down and running back and forth across the snow covered lawn as we got out of the truck and hulled our bags over to them.

"Ahh ha! You guys are back!" Chippy said, raising his arms above his head like this was the best news he ever could receive. "Dude, you ready to smoke?" pointing to me. "Now you're definitely ready to smoke," now fixing his gaze on Matt.

"Ahh, nah, no thanks," Matt said, heaving a bag of groceries up that began to slip. "I don't smoke weed."

“Ahh, dude, you gotta now,” Chippy said.

“No, thanks.”

“Aww… okay, but you’re gonna by the end of winter break.”

“Maybe, we’ll see,” Matt said nervously.

“Ight,” Chippy said. “Bet. Sjur! My man! How you doing?”

“Uhh, doing good,” he said, taking out his headphones. “Just listening to some music.”

“Oh, what you listening to?”

“Umm, let me see,” he said, pulling out his phone. “Wardruna.”

“Oh… I haven’t heard of that one,” Chippy said. “But I’ll have to check it out. Anyways, what did you guys get?” He said, looking to the bags we carried.

“Oh, dude, you gotta see what I got,” Matt said, dropping his bags to the ground to fish out something from his coat pocket. “Look.”

“A flashlight?” Chippy said, taking it from him and holding it up to his face.

“Don’t turn it on!” Matt said, snatching it back from him. “You could blind yourself. It can produce over 160,000 Lumens of light.”

“So it’s hella bright!” Chippy said, approving the purchase.

After the smoke, we made up an early lunch, some simple turkey sandwiches and frozen french fries that we decided to pair with our five-dollar red wine, a bad choice in itself but made even worse with our select vineyard. As soon as I cracked the seal of the bottle, my nose was oppressed with one of the most pungent, gag inducing scents I’ve ever had the pleasure of experiencing. It smelled like a bottle of fermented vomit with an added dash of old dish rag for good measure, enough to make me nearly throw up as soon as it was opened.

“Ugh!” I let out, covering my mouth with my other hand. “Oh my god, that shit’s vile!”

“What! Come on,” Chippy said, grabbing the bottle and taking a hurried swig before I or the bottle’s scent could convince him otherwise. “Ahh!” he gasped, running for the

kitchen sink to spit out as much as he could. “Ehh, holy shit dude! I was not ready for that. What the hell is that shit? That shit has turned man!” heaving and spitting profusely into the running sink.

I looked into the bottle. What I saw I wouldn’t ever describe as wine, it was more of a foggy brown cocktail, with bits and clouds of sediment floating in the most unappealing way possible. The funny part was that it was labeled as a red blend, but wasn’t even close to being that color itself.

“That’s not wine man, that’s straight up barfy barf,” he said, laughing before spitting one last glob into the sink.

June and Matt walked into the room, brushing past Chippy while being too caught up in their own conversation to realize what was going on.

“Oh, dude, Matt, you gotta try this stuff,” Chippy said, grabbing him by the shoulder.

“What, why?” Matt said. “I don’t really like wine.”

“Oh, but dude, it’s actually really good. Not bad at all, trust me,” He said, taking the bottle from me and pouring some into Matt’s mouth before he could object to it.

Matt looked around for a moment, swishing the liquid around in his mouth without comprehending its flavor until all at once his face turned red, his eyes went wide, and his cheeks puffed up. “Oh my god,” he mumbled out before running for the nearest bathroom.

“Oh shit, you good man?” Chippy called, cackling as he chased after him.

“Hey, what the hell, Chippy! What’s wrong with you?” June said, trailing behind and not finding the situation at all amusing.

After about a minute they returned, Matt laughing with Chippy, though his face now had a bit of a greenish hue to it, while June followed behind them, arms crossed and mouth pulled tightly shut.

“I’m sorry man, but I just had to,” Chippy said, patting him on the back reassuringly.

“Nah, it’s alright,” Matt replied before tucking away into the living room with June.

At dinner Chippy tried to pull the same trick on everyone else, but he ran into a bit of a problem. Everyone that was drinking wine was doing so out of wine glasses, and the cheap wine was clearly brown and gross looking, so anyone drinking would notice it before taking a sip from their glass. To counteract this Chippy walked round the table while everyone else was conversing, slowly filling people’s glasses with the five dollar and a finer yet still cheap red blend, that way people hopefully wouldn’t notice as their glasses were filled with more and more of Nevada’s Best.

“Wait so, when do we have to go up to the cabin?” Kaiser asked, leaning back in his chair while Chippy passed by, pouring some of the wine in his and Jonathan’s glasses.

“Well, we have to go up at least once,” Jonathan said, picking up his glass and swirling it. He looked down at it, and up to Chippy, who was smirking slightly. “And I think the sooner the better. The snow is bound to get worse and I don’t feel like hiking up there when there’s four feet of it,” setting the glass back down on the table without drinking from it.

“Wait,” Chippy said. “What cabin?”

“The cabin in the invitation,” Erin said. “Remember?”

“Oh, yeah!” Chippy replied, pouring some of the wine into Colin’s glass. “No. I don’t remember. I was baked when I looked at it.”

“Wait, hold on a second, what’s that?” Kaiser said.

“What’s…what?” Chippy replied, concealing the second bottle behind the table.

“That, right there!” Kaiser said, pointing to the wine.

“Oh this,” Chippy said, revealing the bottle but holding it far enough away that the label was mostly illegible. “It’s just another wine.”

“Oh, okay.” slinking back down into his chair.

Colin chuckled and took a long swig from his glass. His wine at this point was only about one third Nevada’s Best, but it was enough to be noticeable. His face suddenly scrunched up in a funny way, and his tongue sort of hung out for a moment to cleanse his pallet.

“How is it?” Chippy said, smirking.

“Fine,” Colin said after a moment.

“So, who’s going up to the cabin then?” Matt asked, taking a sip from his can of beer.

Jonathan sat up in his chair. “Well-”

“Well, me for one!” Chippy interrupted. “And Sjur, right Sjur? You’re going.”

“Ehh, yeah! Why not?”

“Great!” Chippy exclaimed. “Oh, and I uhh, got some of the… stuff,” looking at me and winking.

A while back, I talked to Chippy about how I wanted to take acid but never had the opportunity to, and he must have taken note of this, as it was at least a month before winter break. I was honestly ecstatic. “Wait really?” I said.

“Mmm hmm!” He reassured me. “Why don’t we just make it a guys’ trip? No offense ladies,” looking around the room and holding his hands out like an attorney presenting his proposal to the jury. “Any objections? …No?”

“Umm, yeah,” Kaiser said, raising his hand. “Can you pour me some of that wine?”

“Oh! Certainly!” Chippy said, prancing over to Kaiser while just barely maintaining a straight face. “Here ya go, chief,” he said, pouring more of the cloudy brown vine into his glass.

At that point I could’ve sworn the jig was up, as both Kaiser and Chippy took a long pause to look at each-other dead in the eyes, and even from where I was sitting I could see that the wine being poured was considerably darker and earthier in color than what was already in the glass. But Kaiser picked it up, looked at it and said, “Thanks,” before taking a large swig and immediately spitting it out everywhere. “What the fuck? You son of a bitch!” he yelled, slamming the glass down on the table as he got up to face Chippy.

“Oh, shit!” Chippy said, setting the bottle down on the table and running out of the room in a cartoonish manner, closely pursued by the furious Kaiser.

I remember everyone else looking around the table, wide eyed and concerned that Chippy may have seriously upset Kaiser, who might try to do something, possibly even hurt him. Jonathan suddenly and almost instinctively sprung up out of his chair to address the situation, but it soon became

apparent that Kaiser had no ill intentions, joining Chippy's laughter while Jonathan sat back down, rolling his eyes before wiping his glasses down with a napkin.

Soon after, we all moved to the parlor, playing truth or dare while the dogs yipped and ran around us and the crackling fire that illuminated the otherwise dark room. Most of us sat around in a large circle next to the fireplace, all except Jonathan, who leaned against the mantle with a glass of bourbon in his hand, swirling it thoughtfully as he looked into the fire. Chippy laughed and joked with Kaiser, finding everything we did hilarious beyond belief while Erin smirked but mostly tried to contain her more amusing and lighthearted half.

"Ha ha!" Chippy let out, slapping his knee and rolling over after Matt was dared to sit on June's lap. "Easy Matt! Don't break her."

"Oh, he isn't gonna-" she said before suddenly going silent as Matt took his seat.

"Isn't gonna what?" Kaiser retorted, laughing erratically with Chippy.

“Well,” Chippy began once he caught his breath. “Colin, truth or dare?”

“Dare,” He quickly responded.

“Well, I wasn’t ready for that,” Chippy said, stroking his chin before whispering something to Kaiser. Kaiser nodded, and Chippy turned back around and said. “Chug the rest of this bottle,” holding up the infamous brown vine.

Colin snatched the bottle from Chippy, which was about half full. “All of it?”

“Mmm hmm! Yeah!”

“Shit well, bottoms up!” Colin said, tipping the bottle back, but only managing to hold on for about two large gulps. “Awwghh!” he screamed, before requesting a glass of water and holding a hand over his mouth. He started making the most repulsive sounds as he and his body fought the urge to throw up. By the time Erin was back with the water, he pushed it away, barely holding off his body’s reflexes.

“Wait, wasn’t the deal the whole bottle?” Kaiser said after Colin became capable of sitting back down.

“I don’t give a shit,” Colin said, out of breath. “You drink it.” Handing the bottle to Kaiser, who silently refused.

“Whose turn is it?” Renee asked.

“Erin’s,” Chippy said, nudging her with his arm.

Erin thought for a long moment, carefully inspecting everyone until her eyes locked onto, “Jonathan, truth or dare?”

“I’m not playing,” Jonathan said, his eyes still fixed on the fireplace.

“Oh! Boo!” Chippy said before blowing a raspberry. “Why you got to be such a spoiled sport? Come on, man.”

“Yeah, come on Jonathan,” Kaiser repeated before more voices joined in.

“Fine, I’ll play. Truth.”

Erin thought for a moment, resting her chin on her fist as she looked over Jonathan, seemingly studying him and trying to think of what to say. “What are you thinking about over there?” she finally settled on.

Jonathan stood silently for a moment. “Spring. I’m thinking about spring semester.”

“Aren’t we all,” Kaiser agreed, taking a swig of a freshly opened beer. “Marcus, it’s your turn, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Colin, truth or dare?”

“Fuck, me again?” He grumbled, lifting his head slightly. “Dare, but don’t make me drink any more.”

“Huh, never thought I’d hear you say that, Campbell,” Kaiser said, causing Colin to utter a light-hearted chuckle before rolling his eyes and looking back to me.

“Well, why don’t you get your bass and play something for us,” I said.

Colin gave a little smirk. “Okay, but I’m not that good,” he said before quickly disappearing, then reappearing within the span of about two minutes. “Okay,” he said once he hooked the thing up. “All I really know how to play is jazz, or that’s all I can really play right now,” he said before proceeding to slap, pluck, and jam on the bass just as good, if not better than any bassist I had seen or heard before;

though this was probably due to me never really paying any attention to bassists, that and my intoxication.

“Okay,” Sjur said as Colin continued playing in the background. “My turn, right?” And Chippy confirmed. “Ehh, Matt, truth or dare?”

“Hmm, I’ll take another dare,” he said, shifting in June’s lap.

“Okay, then… kiss Chippy.”

Chippy and Matt looked at each other for a moment before both answered, “What?”

“I don’t know!” Sjur laughed.

“Yeah! What about me?” Erin said.

“It’s okay, babe,” Chippy said. “He’s no threat to you and your big hunka munka,” nudging her, to which she smiled and nudged him back. “Well, come on over here, big boy!” Chippy joked, holding both arms out to embrace him.

“Ugh, fine,” Matt let out before kissing Chippy on the cheek.

“No, no!” Sjur interrupted. “On the uhh, the lips.”

“No!” Matt said.

“Yeah, that’s kinda sus Sjur,” Chippy agreed. “But that’s the dare Matt.”

Matt groaned, looking around before reluctantly giving Chippy a light peck and returning to June’s side.

“Okay, Renee Dupont!” Kaiser said in an exaggerated French accent. “Your go.”

Renee looked around the room until her dark eyes met mine. “Marcus, truth or dare?” She said, puckishly winking.

“Dare,” I said.

“Hmm,” she replied, pretending to ponder over this. “Why don’t you come over here and give me a kiss as well?”

“Hmm,” I repeated before I walked over and planted a single soft kiss on her lips, taking a seat next to her.

“*I* didn’t say on the lips,” she whispered before rubbing her shoulder playfully against mine.

A few more rounds went on, but I didn’t pay attention to anything other than her. Her cool dark eyes, the way she flirtatiously played with my shirt, and her charming

nervous smile. After several more kisses that over time grew far larger and more frequent, Jonathan spoke up and said, “Okay, Marcus, why don’t you and Renee take that Zinfandel and go upstairs for the night?”

“Is that a dare?” I said.

“If it has to be,” looking at me and motioning to the stairs with a swing of his head.

“Well,” I said, looking to Renee. “What do you say?”

She looked at me before pulling her gaze away and shooting up to her feet. She started to walk away, but turned around once more as she reached the staircase. “Well, aren’t you coming?”

Four.

Over the past few days we juggled around the idea of going skiing, but it wasn't until one night where we all stayed up late drinking again that we actually made any plans, and that following morning I awoke to Chippy violently shaking me awake.

"Marcus! Wake up! It's already 7:30 man! Wake your ass up," he said as I stirred awake. "There you go, come on man, we gotta go soon."

I rubbed my eyes and saw him standing over me, bundled up with his aviator hat while Colin jumped into a pair of snow pants in the corner of the room. "What's going on?" I mumbled, not recalling our plans from the night before.

"We're going skiing, remember? We talked about it last night."

"Vaguely," I said. "But not really."

"Okay," he said, stepping away from the bedside as he zipped up his coat. "Anyways, we talked about whether we should hit the slopes today since there may not be an opportunity later with the weather and all, and we all

agreed we should. You talked about how you've never gone, and how your family couldn't afford it and you never had the opportunity to go."

"Oh," I simply stated, but inside I started kicking myself. Why did I have to open my mouth and embarrass myself like this? Nobody wanted to hear me complain. "Yeah, well, just give me a few minutes here to change. I'll be ready shortly."

Once I properly gathered myself, I slipped into my overcoat and a pair of snow pants before heading downstairs. There was a constant yelling across the house, accusations thrown and insults hurled as everyone scrambled to get their things together and leave.

"Christian, where the fuck did you put my mittens!" Erin said, storming out of the kitchen.

"Yeah Christian! Where the fuck did you put my mittens?" Kaiser teased.

"I didn't fuckin take them!" Chippy called from the top of the stairs. "Why the fuck would I take your mittens?"

"I don't know. Why did you take my keys?"

“Cause I had to get your shit out of your dorm for you!” Chippy replied.

I went out and stood with Colin and Matt on the front porch, smoking a cigarette as we waited, and after what felt like hours but was really no more than ten minutes, we loaded up Matt’s truck and Colin’s Camaro and headed for the slopes. The entire drive up, I was excited to finally try my hand at skiing, but it wasn't until we neared the resort that my mind made the not-so-subtle observation that I lacked a pair of skis.

“Wait,” I said. “I don’t have any skis.”

“That’s okay,” Chippy said. “You can just rent some.”

The thing was though, I couldn’t. I only saved a couple hundred from my job and of that there wasn’t much left that had to last me until spring. I hated having to ask people for money, it was too much like begging, but if I didn’t I would have to sit inside the lodge all day, and I wasn’t going to do that, not now. I didn’t want to ask Chippy, he was my roommate and I didn’t want to bring that into what had grown of our friendship. I didn’t want to ask Jonathan or Colin either, so I looked around and was

left with Kaiser. We got along well, well enough to ask him for help, but not so much that it felt like it would impact anything terribly.

“Yeah, sure,” He said, pulling two hundred-dollar bills from his pocket and shoving them into my hand. “Just do one thing.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” I said.

“Get a snowboard. Other than Colin, everyone else is skiing.”

I agreed, and soon the handler gave me a pair of boots and a snowboard. I put the boots on and carried the board to the ski lift, nervous as hell as we approached.

“Okay, just strap your left foot in, and stomp down on it a few times to make sure it’s secure,” Kaiser said. “And when we get to the top, just jump off. You’ll be fine. If you land on your feet, that’s great, but don’t feel bad if you fall, everyone does.”

The ride up was a slow and methodical one. We watched as people rushed by below, taking our turns as their ambient observers as some fell and others seized the moment, flying

past with terrific speed. The lift rocked, squeaked, and jittered as it carried us up the slope, but before long I found that Kaiser already jumped off, so I quickly followed. I slid and nearly lost my balance, but didn't fall, something Kaiser hadn't managed.

"Come on now," he grunted, getting up and dragging his board behind him to a small hill. "Were going down that slope over there," pointing to a clearing on the far left. "It's an easier one, but still fun. Just follow me and I'll stop every once in a while for you to catch up and give you some pointers. Just follow my lead and keep on your heel," he said, effortlessly gliding over to the slope.

I tried using my little translatable knowledge I gained from longboarding, but in reality they weren't that similar at all. I kept upright for about five seconds before I fell, uncontrollably heading down the wrong path. I got up and tried again, but my destination was already set, and I was heading down a steep black diamond slope, one of the hardest in the resort. I looked at Kaiser sitting and waving at me to follow him like it was something I could just choose to do. Colin slid up to Kaiser and sat down, chatting with him as they waited for me to join as Chippy raced

down the black diamond slope, shouting “Woo hoo, hoo!” as he passed by. I got up once more, but just continued slipping down further and further the wrong way.

“Hey, how’s it going?” Erin said, skiing up to where I sat. “Has Kaiser taught you how to slide down to him?”

“No, not really,” I said, trying to get up only to slide further.

“Really?” she said. “Well, I would give you some advice, but I know nothing about snowboarding. But if you feel you can’t get over to him, just unstrap a foot and walk over, no one will think anything of you.”

“Alright,” I said. “I’m just going to give it another try first.”

She then slid after Chippy and I tried to make my way over to Kaiser, but when it became apparent I couldn’t, I stopped, unstrapped my foot, and walked over. A small patch of trees separated us, swaying with the mountain breeze, and for a moment, it was like I was transported to another world. Gone were the snowboarders and skiers, and I alone was totally immersed into this little pocket of nature, tucked away high in the mountains of Montana where only the wild things lived and thrived.

Once I got over to him, out of breath and unable to speak, Colin slid off and he quickly stood up. “Well, come on now,” he said, immediately running further down the slope as I sat down.

They slid on down together before veering off near the treeline to light up a spliff. I tried to follow but quickly fell on my ass again, bruising my tailbone, not even close to where they stood. At this time, I didn’t particularly enjoy any of this, and it felt more like a chore than any sort of fun. I didn’t make it to them until they were basically done, only getting one hit before it was out.

“Oop, well shit!” Kaiser said, pulling the stub from my fingers. “Well, let’s get on then!” he said before heading down the slope once more.

This story of me just barely catching up only for him to slink further away repeated on a loop for almost an hour, and it wasn’t until we finally neared the end of the slope that I started to gain my footing and enjoy myself. At the last run I managed not only to catch up to Kaiser but briefly pass him, feeling every bump and wobble beneath my feet, knowing that any one of them could result in a terrible crash, but having the confidence not to fall and the newly

acquired skill to keep my posture stiff, yet fluid; and once it was over and I reached the bottom, out of breath, sore, my whole body twitching and trembling, all I wanted to do was go up again.

My second time down took maybe twenty minutes, and by the third I was able to keep up with Kaiser and Colin, even though I fell more often than them. Before my fourth run down, I managed to download some music off of the resort's Wi-Fi, listening to everything from Kid Cudi to Foo Fighters, each song hitting and vibing more than the last. Trees, hills, and skiers blew past, swept back with the wind that tugged my hair as my heart raced on ahead. What earlier felt like a chore was now not only doable, but invigorated and exhilarated me in a way that made me question why I never saved the money or took the time to do it before.

Colin swerved and swayed from left to right, effortlessly carving through the snow, looking more at home on his board than on his own two feet. Kaiser often blew right past him, and while Colin was more loose and agile, Kaiser was far more aggressive, smashing through deep snow

banks and jumping sometimes feet into the air as he raced down the slopes like the adrenaline junkie he was.

On our last run down, Colin and I met up with Chippy and smoked a joint about halfway down. Kaiser was behind since he had previously taken a different path down with Matt, Sjur, and June, and by the time he regrouped with us, the joint was out.

“Aww, come on,” he said, seeing us put it out as he slid up. “Marcus, that wasn’t yours, was it?”

“No, it was mine,” Colin said in a thoroughly baked voice. “I’m sorry, I just couldn’t wait for you,” coughing loudly before slinking away down the slope without another word.

“Well, do you guys have any more?” Kaiser asked.

“No,” I simply stated.

“I do,” Chippy said. “But it’s down in the car. We can smoke it when we leave.”

“Alright,” Kaiser said, shrugging his shoulders, head down, obviously disappointed, but not enough to voice it.

We lingered for a moment before racing down after Colin, enjoying our final run in silence without a word being spoken until we checked out and got back to the cars. Chippy, June, Kaiser, Sjur and I rode back with Matt in his truck, while everyone else rode back with Colin. Matt and Sjur sat in the front with June squished between them in a fold out seat, while Chippy, Kaiser, and I lounged in the back row with plenty of elbow space.

“Oww! God damn it!” June said, throwing her head back quite nearly into Kaiser, who gave her a swift nudge back forward.

“Hey, fucking watch it!” He said sharply, though no one other than me seemed to notice.

“Damn it! You shouldn’t have hit into me like that Sjur!” she said, shoving him playfully with her fist as Chippy lit up a joint. “That really hurt. I think I may have a light concussion.”

“Hey, shut up!” Kaiser snapped, shoving her forward again. “I’m sure that he didn’t mean to do anything,” taking the joint from the now silent Chippy.

Everyone was silent as Kaiser puffed away and passed the joint to Sjur, who glanced briefly into his eyes before pulling them back when they connected, passing the joint to June. I was sure that June didn't hold anything against Sjur, the way she nudged him with a light chuckle being in good fun, but Kaiser didn't seem to see it this way. I eventually took the joint and puffed on it generously before I put on my shades and laid back, zoning out as I stared off into a grouping of clouds that entranced me with their ever morphing patterns and histories.

Once we got home, all of us sore and tired from our excursions, we made a light dinner and discussed preparations for the cabin trip we planned for the next day, before splitting off into two groups. Kaiser and Jonathan went downstairs to shoot pool while the rest of us moved to the living room to watch a film on Hall's gigantic flatscreen. At first it was suggested by Renee and Sjur that we watch Stranger Things, but since most of us weren't caught up and I myself hadn't seen any of it, the suggestion was shot down. Colin suggested Whiplash, but nobody seemed particularly interested, so we settled on an older action-horror-comedy, Army of Darkness. I sat at one end with Renee and Sjur, while Colin lay stretched out at the other,

sucking on his vape with a glass in his other hand. Chippy and Erin sat on the floor in front of us, snuggled up and constantly whispering and laughing, while Matt and June sat a bit closer to the TV, being nearly as loud as the wind that howled outside.

“Hey! Can you two quiet down over there! People are trying to watch this,” Colin snapped as he turned the volume up with the remote.

The stairway that led downstairs was right next to the living room, and over the past half hour we heard raised voices followed by long pauses of silence, one of which started while Colin was messing with the remote.

“Jesus Christ!” he said, throwing his hand above his head. “I give up,” slinking back down into the couch, sipping his drink.

“Just turn the subtitles on,” Renee said, readjusting herself closer to me.

“Pfft! Subtitles,” Colin scoffed, clicking them on with the remote.

Renee scooched over and rested against my shoulder. Her hair smelled of jasmine, saffron, and rose. I moved closer and put my arm around her as she moved her head up to my cheek. I hadn't been paying any attention to the movie as my eyes were fixed on her. Her pale porcelain skin, her dark hair and eyes, and the way her red lips parted and moved as she watched the film. I couldn't help but stare at her, as every second I looked away or blinked felt like a second wasted.

"Give me some sugar baby," the main character said, resulting in Chippy quietly repeating the line to Erin, earning himself a small kiss.

Shortly after another outburst from down stairs, Jonathan stomped his way up and joined us in the living room. "What are you guys watching?" he said while lighting a cigarette.

"Army of Darkness," Colin said.

Jonathan sighed and sat down in a chair in the corner of the room. "Is it any good?"

"Just shut up and find out for yourself!" Colin said, turning up the volume again.

About twenty minutes later, Kaiser emerged from the basement with the two dogs. Lady ran up and laid next to Jonathan, resting her head on his foot as she shut her eyes and went to sleep. Kaiser fumbled up the stairs and threw himself onto the couch between Colin and Sjur with an unopened beer dangling from his hand; he fell asleep soon after. Throughout the rest of the movie, he would turn from one side to the other, occasionally snoring, to which Colin would nudge him.

“Psst, hey! Shut up,” Colin would say, to which Kaiser would just mumble something and roll back over. Colin eventually took the unopened beer from him and opened it, taking a long sip as the movie continued.

Soon Sjur and Renee also fell asleep, leaving me pinned to the couch, unable to move without disturbing them. Chippy and Erin had both gone to bed, and when Colin followed suit, he asked me if I wanted a drink, to which I declined. June and Matt stayed for a while longer, chatting next to the television with only the occasional chuckle disturbing the room’s otherwise sleepy environment. I soon felt sleep taking hold, and before long, I realized that Matt and June left at some point as well. But before I drifted away to some

long forgotten dream, I remember hearing someone sleep talk or mumble as it were, Sjur. Most of it was either gibberish or in another language, but there were two words I could understand, two words that part of me still doubts I ever heard, “lost…cold.”

When I awoke, I found myself alone with Kaiser on the couch, or at least that’s what I first thought. The room was dead silent and pitch black except for a faint red dot in the corner of the room that faded in and out of life, slowly and consistently.

“Oh, you’re awake,” Jonathan said, startling me enough to flinch. “Renee went to bed, if that’s what you were wondering.”

I looked around the room, not saying a word as I regathered my senses. I rubbed my eyes and looked at Kaiser sprawled out on the couch like he hadn’t a care or worry in the world.

“I expect him to be asleep for a while longer, at least till morning.” He said after a long draw from his cigarette, breathing life back into its ember for a moment.

I rubbed my eyes again. “What time is it?”

Jonathan parsed his lips, a plume of smoke escaping and floating between us like a late fog while he looked at his watch. “Half-past three.”

“Have you been sitting there this whole time?” I mumbled out.

“Yeah, for the most part. I honestly prefer the night. It’s quiet and I can think peacefully.” A small sniff coming from his nose. “It’s…decadent.”

I thought this was an odd word of choice, and I wondered if he actually knew what it meant. If he did, then maybe he was banking on me knowing as well, and he was trying to communicate something, something I unfortunately missed in my confusion. I propped myself up and rubbed my shoulder. “What was that between you and Kaiser earlier? Downstairs.”

“Nothing really,” He said, looking over to Kaiser lying upon the couch. He gave a slight laugh, a smirk showing on his face before he looked down at his feet, and then to me, blank. “I don’t know, he’s just been going through a faze for a while now. I don’t know what it is.” He said, looking over at him once more, longingly, as if briefly reminded of

some past, joyful memory before he pulled himself away again. “At times he seems fine, cheerful, and then out of nowhere he’s thrown into fits of irritability and overwhelming choler. For a time, I thought he just needed to get out and away from things, away from the papers and busy streets to the wilderness and simpler paths, somewhere he could relax and unwind, breathe easily, live naturally. It worked for a while, and the outdoors really seems to do him good, but whatever it is, it’s returned… I now think it’s something deeper, psychological maybe, spiritual, perhaps some past trauma, or the fact that he didn’t grow up close to his parents, or really anyone for that matter, besides me. I really don’t know anymore. Last month I caught him reading the Kybalion of all things, and The Emerald Tablets of Thoth, and now he won’t stop reading Nietzsche. You know that guy inspired Hitler, right? Talking about concepts such as higher and lower men, might makes right, and wills to power. I’m a philosophy major, and even I know not to touch that stuff with a ten-foot pole. I can’t even begin to understand what’s going on with him.” He glanced back again, now looking more like he was bearing witness to his friend’s corpse than anything else. He stamped his cigarette butt

out in an ashtray on the floor, light chaffs of ash floating upwards towards his fingertips before he withdrew and pulled out a new, fresh cigarette. “Did you know that he got expelled from Helton Nostrum before coming here?” Lighting up while looking at me inquisitively.

“No,” I said.

“Oh, of course not,” he replied, rolling back into his chair.

“How’d he manage that?” I asked as Lady walked back into the room, taking her place at his side.

“He threatened a teacher,” he said, chuckling slightly, though I couldn’t tell if it was out of appreciation or contempt. “That on top of rarely attending class, his frequent drinking and smoking on campus, and his constant lack of care for following university guidelines. His father was furious, tried to have them agree to a year’s suspension instead, but they simply wouldn’t have it, said he was a bad fit and didn’t want someone like that representing the school.”

“Did you go there too?” I asked.

“Of course!” He said, almost offended. “It was really nice, pleasant. Countryside, cobble roads, small shops to get lost in and some truly exceptional professors, UJR really can’t hold a candle to most of them.”

I could picture the two of them then, a half a dozen scenes flashing before my eyes: Kaiser on the rowing team, Jonathan discussing philosophy with a teacher in the old vaulted caverns of the library, the two of them at a football game, an autumn breeze blowing through their open dorm window, rustling pages and the smoke that drifted upwards from a half drunk Kaiser’s cigarette as Jonathan revised their homework, Kaiser convincing Jonathan to come out to the bars, getting into a drunken brawl, and returning to campus later that night, a bottle in one hand, a dismembered shoe in the other. How badly I wished I was one of them. How badly I wished I was their friend. It was then that I felt something crawl up from inside me, a thin vine creeping round my heart, a choking briar of jealousy.

“But I felt like getting away from it all by the time Kaiser was expelled, so we came up here.”

I uttered a small stifled laugh, one I perceived he hadn’t heard. “Why UJR? I mean, you went to Nostrum! I’m sure

there were plenty of other, more established schools open to you."

"Well, UJR was one of the few that Kaiser applied to that accepted him after that. You know what they say about The Box, you're either in or you're out. And it's pleasant here, charming even. Sure, it's not as well established as others, but it's got something they don't."

"What's that?" I scoffed.

"Frontier. Compared to everywhere else, Montana and UJR alike feel like a call to adventure. There aren't any major cities here. It feels unexplored and like a breath of fresh air. There aren't many other places like that I can think of, aside from Alaska and Canada, and I'm not quite ready for that weather." He said before giving a homely chuckle.

I laughed too. "Well, we're not that far off here," I said, the wind still howling outside.

"No, I guess not," he said.

The storm battered against the window, snowflakes pressing against the glass like refugees fleeing from some terribly cold regime. Lady let out a small growl, or hum as

it were as we watched the pressing of winter, listful and entranced by its sudden presentation and show of force.

I awoke on the couch, a little lost from the night before, but gradually I stood up and made my way to the kitchen. Colin stood there, leaning against the counter as he stirred a pan of eggs. Kaiser and Sjur stood next to him, talking amongst themselves while June and Matt lurked close by, nearer the mudroom.

“Morning, Marky Mark!” Chippy said from behind, patting me on the back as he walked ahead into the kitchen.

“Morning,” I replied as I reached for a glass and filled it with water.

“When do you think you guys will be ready to head up to the cabin?” Kaiser said as I sat down at the small table.

“Hopefully no more than an hour,” Colin said as I took a sip from my glass.

“Agreed,” Jonathan said as he strode into the room and grabbed a mug from the cabinet. “Best to head up there before this storm hits,” filling his mug with coffee.

“When will that be?” Colin asked as he fished his cigarettes out of his pocket.

“Could be a couple hours, could be another day or two. It’s hard to tell here.”

“Mmm,” Colin agreed as he lit his smoke. “Either way, we should head up soon.”

The plan was to leave before noon, but the hours quickly passed by unnoticed and by the time we were actually ready to head out the sun had already started to set. Jonathan led us up the back of the mountain as a strong wind picked up and tore through the trees, scattering the snow from their branches and across our path in long rushing wisps. After a couple miles, the forest cleared out, leaving only a few sparsely placed trees dotting the otherwise barren mountain side. There was only the sound of my comrades panting and the violent howls of the wind, and once the sun disappeared and the sky darkened, it gave the valley and the rise up a sinister quality, with crags

and ledges where only vague stilted shadows roamed, casting their distorted wails below.

“Oh my god, I think I’m going to die!” Chippy proclaimed as he drug his feet along the ground.

“Yeah, me too,” Sjur said.

“Yeah,” Matt agreed, slinging his bag over. “Can we take a break?”

Jonathan turned around, looking over us as his dark overcoat blew in the rigid breeze.

Colin walked up to where we stood. “Fuck this,” he said, out of breath, throwing his bag to the ground to sit on.

“I’m pretty tired too,” Kaiser said while doing the same. “Let’s catch our breath.”

Jonathan set his bag down as well. “Fine, we can take a break. Just not a long one.”

So we sat down and silently drank some water for a few minutes, but once fresh flakes started wandering down from the sky, we got up and resumed our hike.

By the time we reached the log cabin, it had been well over two hours since we left the house. It sat at the foot of a steep slope, nestled within a large cluster of aspens, which seemed to stretch up to the peak of the mountain. The cabin was small, with two sets of bunk beds occupying the space of the right and far wall, while the left wall had a desk and a set of cabinets along with a furnace in its nearest corner.

We wasted no time starting a fire and heating up the place, but as if by response, the winds outside began to wage war on the walls and door, shaking and rattling them so violently that there was a constant hum throughout the night. For the first half hour, we all just huddled around the fire, warming our hands as it slowly grew large enough to heat the building. Earlier we decided against bringing up any alcohol as it'd only serve to weigh us down and dehydrate us, but now that we were up here with the storm raging outside, we quickly regretted not bringing any.

"Shit, I would kill for a drink right now," Kaiser said as he threw himself on one of the lower beds.

"Me too," Matt said. "I should've thrown a couple of beers into my bag."

“Well, I don’t have any beers,” Chippy said, reaching for his backpack. “But I do have the stuff.”

“The stuff?” Jonathan inquired. “What stuff?”

“Acid.”

“Wait, you brought acid?” Kaiser said, suddenly sitting up. “Shit, let me see.”

“Yeah, there’s enough for everyone,” Chippy said, handing him a sheet of tabs in a plastic bag. “What do you guys say? Little cabin trip with the boys?”

“Well, I’m down,” Colin said, grabbing the tabs from Kaiser to take a look.

“Yeah, I’ve actually been experimenting with some psychedelics lately,” Jonathan said to everyone’s surprise, including Kaiser’s.

“Really!” Chippy said. “I would have never guessed that. But what about you, Matt? You down?”

Matt rocked back and forth in his chair for a second, thinking it over before saying, “Yeah, alright, fine. Just this once, I guess.”

“Sweet!” Chippy replied. “And what about you, Sjur? What do you say?”

We all looked over to Sjur as he sat next to the fire. “Ehh…” He let out as a nervous look crawled across his face. “I don’t know.”

“Sjur…” Chippy pressed. “Oh, come on Sjur, just this once. You don’t have to do it again, I promise.”

“I just don’t really want to,” he pleaded.

“Come on Sjur! Sjur, Sjur, Sjur!” Chippy started chanting as others joined in.

I hesitated at first because I could see that he truly didn’t want to take anything, but as more people joined in and looked to me for support, I reluctantly caved and started chanting with them. He shouldn’t have been made to take anything, and even then I felt bad about it, but eventually he caved as well.

“Okay,” He mumbled out. “Just a little bit, though.”

“Bitch ass!” Chippy said, plucking a tab off and handing it to him. “Were feelin’ to have a great time tonight!”

Shortly after we dropped the acid, Chippy pulled out his small weed pipe and asked us all to partake, to which most of us obliged, minus Jonathan and Sjur. We sat around the fire, coughing and laughing as the storm rattled the windows and whistled through the cracks of the log walls. Once we were finished, we cooked some cheddar sausages which Matt had brought up. Chippy, Matt, and Kaiser gorged themselves, while the rest of us only had a couple. I myself only had one as I oddly enough didn't feel hungry, even after the long hike up and the brief smoke sesh. It was about this time that the first effects of the acid started to manifest.

Jonathan, Colin, and I moved over and sat on some of the beds in the far corner of the room while Sjur hovered timidly around the fire next to the still munching Kaiser, Chippy, and Matt. And it was when I looked into the fire that I realized things around me were beginning to morph, or blend together like a reflection in gasoline tainted water. I couldn't stop looking at how the fire burned and ate away at the logs, how the ashes almost appeared to peel back like individual scales as the log itself breathed in and out as I did.

“You know, this is largely why I wished to come here,” Jonathan said. “To truly get out and live on the edge of the wild, the very precipice of civilization. To connect and delve into the primal side of man, to get lost in it. Answer the call of the wild, so to speak.”

Neither Colin nor I had any idea what he was talking about, but neither of us interrupted, as it was far too captivating for us to stifle or impede in any fashion. Colin pulled out a cigarette, offering me one, which I accepted but placed into my coat pocket as Jonathan continued.

“Sometimes I wonder if civilization was a mistake, modern civilization, that is. We’ve lost contact with what we are, who we are, and as a result, we’ve become numb to the real world and what it truly means to be alive. Everything about our lives is artificial and constructed around these ideas, these human ideas about what it means to live a fulfilling life. Get a job, make money, raise a family, stay faithful and one day die, while nothing remotely touches on the reality of the mortal play. I wonder if it was a mistake to separate us from reality, true reality as far as we have… That’s one thing I disagree with historians and teachers about, they say that the indigenous, ancient, and aboriginal

man was the lowest form of society, the lowliest, while I think the direct opposite. They were able to maintain their touch with the real world, the untamed world, while also developing and enriching their sense of community and society. It wasn't an ultimatum for them, it was… the yin and the yang, the tamed and the untamed, the reality and the imaginary… the un-reality, the civilized."

It was then that he went silent, and it was then that I realized that the whole room was silent. Not a gnawing or awkward silence mind you, but a deep and thoughtful silence, a welcome silence that wasn't truly silent but filled with the sounds of the true world, the natural world, and a silence that outlived the un-silence.

Before long, we all drifted apart into our own little corners of the cabin. I sat in the corner across from the fire, just peering out at everyone else, trying to capture some sort of snapshot of the scene to keep my brain from roaming too deep into its own murky and disorientating thoughts. Jonathan now stood by the door gazing pensively down at the floor, looking like a detective investigating the scene of a murder; ten stab wounds, two dead, one knife, no evidence of a third party, no apparent motive, it didn't

make any sense. Chippy was lying on one of the beds looking into his phone, while Matt lay on another, eyes darting back and forth as he looked around the room, swinging his head around like he was caught in the middle of a heated argument between two invisible figures. Kaiser sat on the floor next to me, staring at the wall, a water bottle dangling from a hand that rested on his upright knee, only occasionally lifting his head to look at the rest of us. Colin rested up on a third bed, watching something on his phone, cool as a cucumber, while Sjur, well…

Sjur sat next to the furnace alone, twitching and fidgeting as his eyes peeled back, wide and bloodshot, fixed on the fire's embers. One hand messed with his hair (sometimes violently) while the other was cupped over his mouth, like he could see Matt's quarreling couple or just witnessed Jonathan's grizzly murder scene. There was no way he could have known what he signed up for, and I felt a sudden instinctual urge to comfort him and help him through whatever he was going through. But before I could get up, he suddenly jolted to his feet, terrifying and gripping us all with his proclamation. "I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die! Oh god! I'm gonna die!" After which he started

shouting in Norwegian, thick, heavy words that carried a tangible weight in the air.

I could do nothing but watch as he stood there screaming in a language I had no hope of understanding. I was quite literally frozen with fear, and my urge to help him inexplicably melted away as my body stiffened and a feeling of dread consumed me.

“Sjur,” Chippy said, rushing over to him like a medic on the battlefield. “Sjur, you’re fine. Look at me, man. You’re okay, we’re here. You’re fine man,” placing his hands on his shoulders reassuringly.

Kaiser got up as well, phone in hand. “Sjur, here, just sit down and watch this with me. You’re okay, don’t worry. Just relax, breathe. It’s Rango. It’s funny,” handing him his phone as he sat down on the floor beside him.

It didn’t take long for Sjur to calm down after that, and within a few minutes he became glued to the screen, often smiling but ever quiet as his previous words still hung around like some terrible curse. Around this same time, Chippy disconnected his airpods and let music play out his phone’s speaker. The overwhelming majority was modern

rap, Baby Keem, Ski Mask, Kodak, and Kendric, but every once in a while he'd let a completely different type of music slip out.

I sat there and watched as the room stretched out around me, colors darting in and out of my periphery as my ears were filled with the sound of Jim Morison and his soft parade. I looked out the window and saw a tree shiver at my sight and the reflection of a complete imbecile and obtuse oaf staring back. His face was a reflection of my own, only lost, ugly, fearful, and alone; a rat amongst men. Morison assured me that this was the best part of the trip, but I remained unconvinced, and something egged me to go outside. "I have to pee," I said, and no one so much as shot a glance.

I threw on my coat and flung open the door where I was met with a burst of icy wind that hit me straight in the face; I was already moving though, and this would not stop me. I walked out among the aspens, swaying with trees that irradiated colors like the northern lights and seemed to stretch so high they might swallow the stars. I reached into my coat pocket and withdrew the cigarette Colin gave me before I leaned back against a tree and lit it, watching as

the forest dazzled with its rhythmic dancing. Why did I come out here again? I don’t know, but I was enjoying myself.

I finished my cigarette and squatted down to stamp it out in the snow below, but as I did, something slowly and cautiously stepped out of the forest. I’d been seeing things for the past hour, colors, distortions, and vague shapes in my periphery, but this was none of those. Out of the aspens and among all the other things that haunted my sight strode a great gray wolf, a dire wolf. I lived in Montana all my life and never once saw a wolf, and something told me I didn’t see one then, but amongst all those strange and fantastical things my eyes beheld, it appeared to be the only real thing there.

I froze as it walked not ten feet from where I stood. Its head raised and froze as well, its eyes meeting mine in the darkness. My heart raced and fears clouded my mind. I took one tense step back before it placed one paw forward, as if reminding me it could chase me down. I could’ve climbed a tree, I could’ve ran, I could’ve fought, but I did none of those things; and in that irrational moment, my mind made an irrational decision. It walked, and I followed.

It led me on through the forest, down past borders and to the edge where an old wooden shack stood. Its door swung open, and the creature looked at me while whispers crawled out. “Marcus, Marcus,” they said. I peered into the darkness and felt my soul touched by a specter’s hand, a chill running up my spine before the door slammed shut, and I was left alone.

Only once I got inside did I realize my feet were bare, and my boots were gone. Water dripped from my coat, puddling around what I now recognized as my warming, numb feet. I looked up and was petrified.

Kaiser stood with his nose pressed into the corner of the room, completely motionless as he breathed in long, raspy breaths. Matt sat atop one bunk while Colin lay in another, both staring wide eyed at a spot on the wall like they’d seen a ghost there. Chippy lay sprawled out in the middle of the floor, looking like Jesus Christ reincarnated and crucified for our sins once more. And atop a chair placed mere inches from what remained of the fire stood Sjur, shivering while he clutched a blanket and piss dripped from his pants.

“Oh, hi. You,” Jonathan said in a casual tone, looking at me from his chair like I was someone he only vaguely recognized. “Welcome back,” looking down to the floor while dragging from a cigarette, seemingly oblivious or unconcerned with everyone else in the room.

I didn’t know what to do. I stood there, trying to take in everything for who knows how long until I knew that Sjur needed help. He desperately needed help. I cautiously walked over, trying not to startle him as I myself slowly took in the gravity of the situation.

“The fire, it’s gone cold,” he said cryptically. “We’re going to die if it goes out.” his eyes not moving from the furnace.

I glanced down at it; there was no fire left, only a few smoldering coals that glowed with waves of orange light. I looked back at him. He looked like a demon, a night terror, a ghost, and his face echoed the terrors of poverty, descriptions and quotes by Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, and H. P. Lovecraft.

“Come down,” was all I managed to say as I gave him my hand.

Kaiser instinctively pulled himself away from the corner and slumped over to us, reminiscent of a midnight drunkard or a bum. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get you out of those pants.”

Before long, the sun was up, and the night was over. Nobody except Matt and Sjur got any sleep, and Chippy, Colin, and I still felt the acid’s effects long after. Shortly after the sun rose, Jonathan and Kaiser went out to inspect the exterior of the cabin for any sort of damage it may have received over the past couple of months.

I looked out the window while great bellowing gusts of snow blew past. Foxhounds, horses, chariots, and soldiers howled and blew their trumpets as they rode by, bathed in the twinkling white light of a blizzard as they pursued some grand elusive game, destined to evade them; Wotan’s wild hunt, but I was the only one who could see it.

“Alright,” Jonathan said as he and Kaiser came back inside. “Let’s pack up and get going. Cabin’s fine, and the storm is moving in,” looking at us plainly.

Kaiser walked over to the side of Sjur’s bed. “Sjur,” he said, shaking him. “Sjur, wake up.”

“Mmm… wha… what is it?” he said, rolling over and rubbing his eyes.

“Come on, get up. We’re going back to the house.”

We managed to dry Sjur’s pants out for the most part, and after a quick breakfast of cheddar dogs and marshmallows, we left.

“Hey! Give me back my sweets!” Chippy said, snatching the bag of marshmallows from Matt as he closed the door.

The walk back down was a peaceful one. I wore several pairs of socks on my feet and wrapped them in plastic bags. It worked well enough to keep them dry, but made it easy to slip and fall when going through mud or anything remotely wet. Once we neared about the halfway mark, we were pleasantly surprised to find the pathway cleared. The blizzard hadn’t reached this far, or at least not yet.

Like most everyone, I hadn’t realized it was Christmas Eve. We stumbled into the house, a messy shamble of hooligans welcomed with wreaths and winter decorations brought up from the basement or handmade with care.

“Hi!” Erin said in a high-pitched squeal. “How was the trip?” embracing Chippy warmly, her bright red Santa hat rubbing against his cheek.

“Oh, it was terrible, no cap!” Chippy said with a goofy grin. “But we’re okay.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay,” she said, still holding him tight. “I started a new painting while you were gone. Want to see it?”

Chippy and I followed her into the living room, where she arranged her painting on an easel with several paints and brushes scattered about it. It was of the house, or at least it was going to be; right now, it wasn’t much more than a few lines on an otherwise barren canvas. We watched her work on it, and eventually Colin joined us. After a while though, the three of us left her and went out to walk through the forest as our high finally left us.

It was so peaceful and tranquil, coming down from a long, exhaustive high, watching the trees bend in the gentle wind, not a blizzard at all yet. We wandered around the forest, strolling and smoking a cone that Chippy prepared, watching as critters peered behind branches and clouds dusted the world in a powdered sugar snow. None of us spoke, and none of us had to, as the world filled our silence with sounds of its own. Within a half hour though, a loud boom echoed throughout the forest. The three of us walked out and over to the house, where we saw Jonathan walk out through the back door.

“What was that?” Chippy asked.

“I don’t know, I just heard…” Jonathan said, stopping once he noticed Kaiser off in the distance. “Jesus Christ, what now,” stomping over to him.

We trailed behind him as he walked on towards Kaiser, and we were soon able to see that Kaiser was hauling something large towards us. He had a shotgun slung over one shoulder while he drug the thing along with his other hand.

“What’s that?” Chippy called.

Kaiser stopped and heaved it up. “Christmas turkey,” he said before letting it drop once more.

Jonathan stopped before he turned around and trudged back to the house, almost looking more pissed off than before.

“Shit, how’d you get that?” Chippy asked as he took a closer look.

“It was just standing over there by the treeline!” He said, pointing over to the spot. “Luckily, it was still there after I grabbed the shotgun.”

For the next couple hours Chippy, Colin, and I meandered around the house, playing pool at one point, smoking at another, but eventually we walked through the kitchen where Kaiser and Matt prepared the bird.

“So, you seem to be getting along pretty well with June,” Kaiser said, washing off the now bare skinned turkey.

“Oh, Junie Powwow?” Matt said, plucking a few straggling feathers from under a wing. “Yeah, she’s fine. Why do you ask?”

“Well,” Kaiser said. “Just don’t get too close to her, she’s insane. You haven’t slept with her yet, have you?”

Matt was quiet. “Well, no,” he said, getting more uncomfortable by the second.

“Good,” Kaiser replied nonchalantly. “She’s one of those clingy bitches. Crazy. You know when Jonathan and her were together, he couldn’t go anywhere without her blowing up his phone! Within a week, he had to start locking himself in my dorm room just to get away from her. He ended up spending nearly an entire month in there! Kaiser,” he said, imitating June’s voice. “Kaiser! Kaiser, open the door, I know he’s in there! Kaiser!” Laughing loud. “Ahh, Jesus Jonathan. I’m honestly surprised something hasn’t happened between them since she’s been here.”

“Like what?” Matt asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Something, anything.”

Shortly after, I left upstairs and laid down on the small couch in the mezzanine hallway. It gave me an uninterrupted view of the downstairs entry way where June and Matt now stood, though my focus lay on the ceiling

above me. I wasn't sleepy or tired at all. In fact, I felt like I just woke up from a lovely deep sleep. The wood graining of the roof flowed and swayed like a calm trickling stream through the mountains; Lewis and Clark's illusive pass leading out into the Pacific. I must have stared at that ceiling for hours before I heard any sound from downstairs.

"Yeah!" June said below. "That's a great idea! We should totes do that. Let's just check in with some of the others first," she said, causing Matt to walk over to the kitchen.

"Hey Chippy," He said, peeking his head in. "What do you think about going to midnight mass tonight?"

"Eh-he-he," he nervously chuckled. "I don't know, I'm still-"

"Yes!" Erin interrupted. "Of course! Don't you think so, Cristian?"

A few mumbles echoed, but no clear words or objections, all shot down by Erin before they could get off the ground.

"Marcus!" June called up to me.

"What?" I slurred out, still staring at the oaken ceiling. "What is it?"

“Do you wanna go to church with us tonight?”

I grumbled for a moment, but before I could speak, I heard Sjur’s voice pop out from somewhere. “Yes, please. Let’s go now.”

June giggled. “Well, it doesn’t start for at least six hours?” Silence. “But we could leave sooner, catch some dinner and pick up a few things while we’re down there?”

“Okay,” Sjur said before disappearing.

At about 6:55 people started getting things together to go down to Leon.

“Aww, come on, this sucks!” Kaiser complained while stomping down the stairs. “That’s fucking stu-”

“Shut up,” Jonathan said, prodding him in the back with his fingertips. “We’re going. We can take your car.”

“Ugh, fine, whatever,” running his hand through his golden hair in frustration.

Erin stormed into the entryway, furiously spitting back at Chippy who meandered behind her. “Christian! Why didn’t you start the car yet? Give me the keys, damn it,” jogging

back to rip them out of his hands before fleeing out the front door, slamming it behind her.

Chippy fast walked over to the door, taking big comedic steps while looking towards me with a goofy face before leaving out after her.

It was decided that we'd take a posse of vehicles down, Chippy's, Matt's, Colin's, Kaiser's, and mine to be precise; though I tried to object to this.

"Come on, you said that you wanted to go out driving sometime," Kaiser urged.

"Yeah, it's just that I don't know if it can make it down right now," I said.

"Dude, I got a tow cable," Matt pressed, and Kaiser looked at me expectantly.

"Okay, fine," I said. "But I only have room for one other in my car."

"Great," Kaiser said. "And that's all you need. There's five vehicles and ten people going."

Chippy and Erin rode together, same with Matt and June, while Jonathan and Kaiser stuck together in his Cadillac, and Sjur went off with Colin in his orange Camaro. Renee rode with me, calm and placid while my car's engine squeaked consistently in the background.

She grabbed my knee as the car slammed to the ground, transmission abruptly jolting with a thud. "Putain!" she exclaimed, before letting out an amused laugh.

The drive down this time took more than twice as long as the first, most vehicles not faring as well as Matt's. Luckily, he had the tow cable to pull us out when the snow was too deep or road conditions too rough. Unluckily, however, Matt didn't make for the best tow truck driver.

At a particularly rough part in the road, there was a massive muddy ditch, a series of dips and carved out ruts that stretched for about thirty feet. Matt made it through with little trouble, and Kaiser followed closely behind him, pushing his car through at high speed. For a second, it appeared like he got stuck before he pushed through, making it out of the other side without any assistance. Chippy went through next, sloshing down into the muck and floating ice slowly and with caution, slipping in with a

sudden jolt before wading forward a few inches, only to come to a halt. He threw it in reverse, engine letting out a thunderous yet muffled purr while the rear wheels sprayed the car with a heavy coat of mud and grime.

“You stuck?” Colin said, as he cautiously rolled by, a Camel cigarette hanging from his lips.

“Fucking goddamn it!” Chippy said, pounding his steering wheel furiously. “Yeah, it seems that way.”

“Alright, I’ll tell Matt,” Colin said, rolling his window back up before swinging out in front, storming forward through the mud recklessly. He swerved from left to right, looking like he’d get stuck any second, but somehow managed to make it to the other side, V-8 roaring to life as it climbed out of the pit.

Within a few moments, Matt backed up his truck to the edge of the ditch, its exhaust bellowing out deep throaty gurgles, sounding more like a tractor or a semi than any normal truck. “Alright, that should do it,” Matt said after attaching the cable to the front of Chippy’s car.

“Should I go now!” Chippy yelled before Matt even made it back to his truck, slamming his foot down on the gas and honking on his horn in obnoxious short bursts.

They bickered back and forth, pulling and tugging his car, each of them working against the other, Matt not giving any good directions while Chippy made up his own. Finally, after about five minutes, Chippy’s car was lifted from the mud, but since he wasn’t paying attention to the road in front of him he slammed his car into the back of Matt’s truck, creating a loud thud followed by a drawn out honk from my Matt’s horn.

Matt’s truck was fine, but Chippy’s front bumper detached from the left side, letting it flop and hang loosely like a broken jaw. I got stuck as well, but after about two minutes we were all on the road again; and once we crossed the bridge and hit pavement, the drive was fine, all five vehicles driving in a single file line like a small Christmas parade.

The sun slowly set behind the horizon, treating us to a dazzling display of orange and lilac clouds before they too disappeared, a heavy snowfall greeting us as we passed the sign that read, “Welcome to Leon.”

“Ugh,” Kaiser let out, slamming his door shut as the rest of us slunk out of our vehicles. “Why are we here so early? Mass doesn’t even start for a good four hours,” glancing at his watch before he threw his arm to his side.

“We can catch dinner or something,” June said.

Erin walked over, Chippy swinging from her arm. “Yeah, we could also get some things from the general goods store. Gifts maybe?”

“Oh! White elephant!” Chippy shouted.

“What?” Renee said, looking to me for an explanation.

“Oh, my bad!” Chippy said with a wave of his hand. “We should all get gifts and exchange them with one another. Oh! And the thing is, you don’t know who’ll end up with your gift, so try to keep it pretty universal. Don’t make it specific to one person.”

We all walked into the general goods store, a crowd of ten students entering only thirty minutes before closing. I saw the cashier (also the owner) shake her head slightly as we entered. Not in a disagreeable way, mind you, but more in a way that just said, “College kids.”

We browsed the aisles, each of us looking for some definable gift, something unique and special. I stuck to the gift shop area of the store, looking at tiny carved keychain bears, decorative mugs, and old joke gift cards with phrases like ‘Montana Sunbather’ plastered onto an accompanying brown filtered photograph of a man laying on a snow covered roof, shades on and beer in hand. I thought most of these gifts, although charming in their own respect, rather tasteless, only earning a half-hearted smile before being thrown into a desk drawer, never to see the light of day again.

I continued, glancing over these rather unremarkable objects until something rather charming caught my eye. Hidden amongst these mundane trinkets was a set of what I thought to be quite splendid earrings. They had a few small stones spaced out on a chain that dangled from the hook, jade and coral, and at the end was a small wood burned crest, a circular logo of UJR. I wanted to get them, specifically for Renee, but they were priced at forty dollars, and I’d have to get something else too. I opened my banking app on my phone, just barely above fifty. I had a little cash on me, but only about twenty. I looked around

and grabbed one of the wooden bear keychains, one with a bottle opener, and approached the counter.

Colin just finished up, stepping out the front door with an armload of bags, wine and liquor bottles clinking together like chimes as the cashier said, “Thanks, and have a wonderful Christmas!” before the door slammed shut. “Hello!” She cooed as I stepped to the register. “Will this be all for you today?”

“Yes,” I said, retrieving my wallet. “And can I get a bag to put those in?”

“Why certainly,” she said. “Let me get you a box for those earrings as well,” darting off to the corner of the shop I retrieved them from. “They are beautiful, aren’t they?”

“Yes, thank you,” I said, looking up to the cardboard cutout Nine and Three Quarters sign that twirled above my head.

“And so that will just be forty dollars for you today.”

I looked up at her, pleasantly surprised.

“We have a million of those keychains,” she said, chuckling before handing me my bag. “And there you are! Have a wonderful Christmas, and do come back again!”

“Thanks, you too,” I said before exiting.

I walked out, the snow now falling heavier than before, large sticky clumps clinging to everything it could touch. Chippy, Erin, and a few of the others crowded around the front of Chippy’s car, examining the damage. Renee was there too, snowflakes falling gracefully and gripping to her dark hair, her tight red jacket, and her long blinking eyelashes.

“Poor Clarence,” Erin said as a gust of wind tossed up their scarves and coats.

“Poor indeed,” Chippy said.

“Well, at least it’s nothing major,” Colin said, trying to comfort him as he tossed his bags into the trunk of his Camaro with a loud clank.

“Yeah, just his face,” Chippy replied, pulling himself away, too displeased to continue looking. “Marcus!” he said, suddenly in a better mood. “Tell me, what did you get?”

“Well, I can’t tell you that!” I said to him, though it was to Renee I looked.

He laughed warmly and patted me on the back. “Of course,” He said. “I was just checking.”

Within the span of a few minutes, everyone managed to make it back outside, some of them with only a small sack, while others were weighed down with grocery bags and boxes of beer.

“Can you get the door for me?” Matt said to June, out of breath as he struggled to keep everything in his arms from dropping.

“Mmm, I’m hungry,” Chippy said, stretching out his arms like a tired toddler.

“So,” June said, closing Matt’s door after he loaded everything inside. “Is it Eddie’s, or the bar?”

“Well, it ain’t Eddie’s!” Chippy said, before making a hurling sound.

The decision was made to go to the bar, The Elkhorn; a warm rustic interior, dark hardwood floors and counters with old-fashioned bar stools. A few lonely country folk were scattered about, watching the screens that played old westerns and hunting excursions or gambling away at the

slots, flashing lights and arcade sounds echoing from their machines.

Most of us sat down at a table in the corner of the room, though June, Matt, Kaiser, and Colin decided to sit at the bar counter. Of the four of them, Kaiser was the quietest, only making a passing comment or throwing a quick quip their way as they carried on their conversations. I ordered a coffee and a fry, and even though I was still hungry after, I wasn't hungry enough to spend more than I already had. I sat there not making much conversation, just observing the others; the way Chippy bit into his burger only to laugh seconds later, mouth open and full, how Jonathan slowly sipped at his old-fashioned and checked his watch every couple minutes, and how Renee eyed me from behind her drink with a cute, yet nervous smile.

We loitered around the bar till about ten thirty or so, drinking local draft beers, IPAs, and lagers, downing them as the minutes ticked on. At one point, Colin pointed out an old outdated sticker of UJR that had been pressed onto the fridge, faded and barely recognizable.

"Oh, that old thing? That's been there since ohh… 87, I believe. My old crony Brian stuck it there after he led the

Elks to their first and only national victory," he said, handing Colin another brew. "Ahh, those were the days. Yup, out here we bleed red and purple. You kids know nothing of the glory days," turning to leave, wiping down the counter as he left.

Eventually, Kaiser reared his head back, slamming his now empty mug of beer down on the counter, clearing his throat before turning to me and saying, "So, Marcus, how about that drive?" raising his head drunkenly.

I hadn't noticed until then how much he drank, his face flushed, eyes glassy and mellow, and beads of sweat grew on his forehead as his hand fumbled around with the glass. "Are you good to drive?" I asked.

"What?" he said, sharpening his tone and taking me by surprise. "Why would I ask you to go driving if I couldn't myself?"

I sat there for a moment, trying to think of how best to respond, before he sighed and fixed his gaze on Colin instead.

"Colin," he mumbled, swinging his legs back and forth on the bar stool.

“What?” Colin said, pulling away from a screen that played an old western starring Robert Duvall. “What is it?” eyes now on Kaiser.

Once Kaiser repeated his question, Colin agreed, dragging me along with everyone else out with them. At one point, Jonathan tried pulling Kaiser to the side to speak in private, but Kaiser shrugged him off, throwing Jonathan’s hand off his shoulder as he slunk down into his car, slamming the door shut.

We drove down the road a ways, barreling through the wind and heavy snow, high beams casting wide arks of light through the swirling flakes. The wind kicked up drifts of ivory powder that skated and slithered along the surface of the asphalt, and a profound inky black hung behind the snow, a curtain that shrouded the world around us, making one area indistinguishable from the next; an ocean of blizzarding chaos. Eventually, we settled on a spot about four miles away from Leon, a long stretch of pavement with no car or sign of life to be seen besides our own flashing turn signals on the side of the endless road.

“Well, what are we doing out here?” Chippy said, kicking a clump of snow with his untied boot. “Admiring the view?”

“I was figuring me, Colin, and Marcus might drive ahead. See who has the best ride,” looking to me, green tweed hanging loosely from his shoulders.

“Well, I’m gonna smoke,” Chippy replied, quickly noping out to go hotbox Clarence.

“To be honest, I doubt I could keep up if I wanted to,” I said, not exactly comfortable with the idea of racing, much less in these conditions.

“That’s fine, no one here is taking this seriously,” Kaiser said.

“Yeah, because to be frank Kaiser, you’re not winning this,” Colin said in an alcoholic slur.

A breeze picked up and rustled through Kaiser’s golden hair, and a cheeky prideful smile glinted off his face. “You think so?” he said. “Because, to be frank with you, I don’t think you could win this on a good day, Campbell.”

Colin stood quietly, staring at Kaiser for a moment before swiftly fleeing, grabbing Sjur by the arm and escorting him back to his vehicle. He tore off the side of the road, engine

growling as the tail lights glowed a deep red, illuminating the falling snow as he awaited Kaiser and myself.

Kaiser walked off to his car as well as Jonathan lingered behind, long since out of patience. Both of their doors closed with a satisfying click before the Cadillac roared to life, peeling up alongside Colin's fiery Camaro, kicking gravel and snow up behind it.

"Come on," I said to Renee in a disgruntled tone. I had such little desire to do this that I didn't even entertain them with revving my engine, silently pulling up alongside them, only notable sound being the squeaking of its damaged belt.

Three honks distinctly bellowed from Kaiser's black sedan before it and the Camaro tore off, their engines at first both distinct entities before they melded together into one distant hum. I didn't drive slowly, but I could have pushed my car faster if I wanted to, instead preferring to stay a comfortable distance behind them. Kaiser seemed to have gained an early lead, but as they grew further and further away from myself, it became more and more apparent that Colin was going to overtake Kaiser, it was just a matter of when. But, this never happened.

I lost sight of them around a long bend in the road, at the end of which I found the sight of Kaiser's car, blinkers engaged, on the side of the road. Jonathan stormed out, cursing as he followed a set of tracks that led off the road, out into the pale wastes of the winter prairie flats.

"What the fuck happened!" I said after I parked my vehicle, Kaiser only now emerging from his own.

"Colin lost control," he said cooly, lighting a cigarette as he followed the tire tracks.

I was surprised to find Colin's vehicle only about twenty feet from the road, as in this weather, even with his lights on, it appeared completely invisible until you were practically on top of it.

"What the fuck is wrong with you!" Colin shouted, pulling himself away from his previous engagement with Jonathan to address Kaiser. "It's a miracle that I didn't crash or flip my car, much less that both me and Sjur aren't dead!"

"You hit the barrier," Kaiser replied. "I didn't push you into it. Try taking some responsibility for a change."

“You swerved the hell out in front of me! What the fuck were you doing?”

I looked at Colin’s car. The driver’s side had been torn to shreds, long scratches dug deep into its orange surface, ripping the side mirror from its mount and stretching across the entire length of the body like claw marks.

“You could have fucking killed me you bastard!” He said, aggressively pushing Kaiser with both hands as a stiff breeze picked up behind him and obscured his vehicle once more.

Kaiser snatched one of Colin’s hands by the wrist, holding it up high and squeezing it tightly until it appeared almost purple against his own. “Keep your hands off of me! And I’d watch who you call bastard more carefully, Campbell,” flinging him away, his words as cold as the air around him.

Colin stepped back, barely maintaining his balance as he mumbled out the words, “Fuck you.”

Kaiser turned and walked away, undisturbed and seemingly impervious as Colin stormed back to his car fuming, its engine still running before he tore off, leaving Sjur behind without a word. The thing was, I’m not even sure whose

fault the accident was. I was more inclined to believe Colin, I don't really know why, but on the other hand, Kaiser's car was in pristine condition, not a scratch on it.

Jonathan rubbed a hand against his nose before he pursued Kaiser, placing a firm hand on his shoulder and pulling him around to face him. Kaiser tried to ignore and brush him off, but Jonathan's grip remained firm, whipping Kaiser's entire body around before he slapped him across the face, a sobering and sharp sound emanating from the open-handed blow. A thick tension lay between them, so much so you could nearly scoop it with a spoon. Kaiser's eyes, now furious, locked onto Jonathan's, full of contempt.

"What's the matter with you," Jonathan said with a venomous bite before he turned away to enter the passenger side door. "Get yourself in the car,"

We pulled up to the church around five minutes before midnight. Neither Renee or I had spoken the entire drive there, and we both just sat there in silence for a moment, looking at the church as the others pulled up. Finally, after a minute, we got out, the silence becoming too unbearable as we saw the others exit their vehicles and walk around.

“Where’s Colin?” Chippy asked as he stumbled out of Clarence and through a group of people shuffling past.

“I think he may have went back to the house,” I said, Renee looping her arm through mine as we walked up the steps.

“Aww, what?” Chippy let out. “How come he gets out of this?” stamping up the cement steps behind me.

I was going to answer him and explain what had happened, but before I could, my ears were met with the sound of a choir echoing from inside the warm church interior. A tiny, frail old man stood at the door, handing out leaflets as he looked over each of us with his large cartoonish lenses, his jostled gray hair wavering gracefully in the wind.

“Welcome, always good to see young folks round here,” he said with a chipper smile, handing me a flier with his knotted, shaky hands. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” I replied, taking the leaflet and placing it in my coat pocket before I entered the old chapel with Renee and the others.

It felt like I was transported to another time, another world, a simpler time where people were their professions,

and their professions only; a cattle rancher, a banker, a mailman, a chef, a butcher, all people of God, gathering together on his holiest of holy days.

Kaiser brushed past us, running a hand through his hair as he muttered to himself, eyes glued to the floor as he stormed past. Jonathan stuck close to him, but stopped for a moment to wish the old man a Merry Christmas and shake his hand before he followed after his volatile peer. Chippy and Erin followed Renee and I into a pew on the left side before everything went quiet. I looked around, walls yellowed and cracking, wooden ceiling drooping to one side from years of neglect. Some of the stained glass windows were cracked or had pieces of the glass replaced, while others were completely covered and closed off, abandoned and left to fall apart, the rest of the church not far behind. An older gentleman and his fat wife glared at me and Renee from behind their pocked and reddened noses, while an impatient father grabbed and smacked his child upside the head, taking both me and the others aback.

Chippy looked at me with wide eyes. “What the fuck,” he mouthed before everyone sprung to their feet.

An out of tune piano started up Oh Holy Night, everyone joining in the chorus as a small procession made its way towards the altar. The piano was played by an elderly woman, quite terribly I might add, her youthful energy all but extinguished before she suddenly stopped, as if she completely forgot how to play. Oddly enough, the only people who seemed to notice this was myself and the others, everyone else carried on singing, like this had become a regular occurrence and not at all out of the ordinary. I thought it all terribly sad, tragic even; the dilapidated church with its ages of neglect, the piano player long since her prime, and the entire host of the town and surrounding area, old and abandoned by their families, left to farm their fields until the day they dropped dead.

If there was one lively thing about the mass, it was the pastor, a middle-aged man who walked with the aid of a cane, his gray wispy hair adding a significant charm to him; and when paired with his large pair spectacles, it gave him a sort of intellectual feel, looking more like a teacher of ethics or the humanities than a lone pastor in rural Montana. He was a young man compared to most of the people in that church, wild and full of vigor, fueled by the fire of the lord with all its passions and eccentricities,

shouting, “God sent his son to man so that they may be of God! And those who ignore the son and separate themselves from God will never find peace, life, beauty, love, acceptance, or forgiveness! They will crawl through the muck, scorning the almighty as they run from the light, cowering until the day they repent and return to him, or face him for judgment.” As he spoke this, he pointed out people in the audience with thrusts of his cane, myself among them. Something inside of me shrank when he did this, and wanted to flee. It felt like he was singling me out from the others, and his words, instead of comforting me, burned and stung more than the winds and the blizzards outside ever could. But something else held me there and kept me from leaving early, for he was truly like no pastor I had seen before, or have seen since.

We got home around two o’clock, tired and worn out. I hadn’t slept in over a day and was ready to pass out for the night when we saw Colin’s car parked out in front of the house. The snow had been falling for a while and was falling still as we rolled up, the car now covered in a heavy jacket of white powder.

“Jesus Christ!” Chippy exclaimed. “What happened?” running his fingers along the deep scratches in the car’s side.

We walked inside to see Colin’s groceries thrown carelessly next to the stairs while a trail of shoes, socks, and bottles led us to the living space. Colin laid on the couch sprawled out, sandy hair wild and unruly, mouth ajar and snoring loudly over the blaring sounds of anime from the TV. A bottle of half drank wine sat next to him, some of which spilled onto his starched white shirt and coat lapel in purple blotches. He couldn’t have slept sounder if he had tried.

I awoke on Christmas day in my bed alone, but evidence remained of Renee being there during the night: her boots still neatly placed next to the door, her coat thrown over my chair, and her pants and bra left at the foot of my bed in a rumpled pile. Colin appeared to have never made it up and most likely slept on the couch for the entire night.

I jumped into a pair of pajama pants and a sweater before I walked downstairs where my nose was met with the sumptuous smell of seasoned sausages, eggs, and bacon sizzling in a bubbling frying pan.

“Down, Lady, down,” I heard June say before a light chomping and an affirmative, “good girl!”

“Morning,” Colin greeted as I stumbled into the kitchen, seemingly suffering no side effects from last night as he drank a cup of whiskey infused coffee while stirring the eggs. “How’d you sleep?”

“Pretty good,” I said as I looked around the kitchen. Remus and Lady inhaled food loudly from their bowls in a corner while June fetched them a dish of water, and Chippy and Erin snuggled up on a counter, whispering into each other’s ears as Chippy munched on a few pieces of bacon he snagged while Colin wasn’t looking.

“I bet so,” Colin replied, shooting me a concealed wink. “Here, have some coffee.”

“Thanks,” I said before taking a sip of the boiling hot liquid. “How’d you sleep?”

“Fine. Fine as I could I guess,” uttering a light chuckle before he went back to the eggs, not wishing to delve any further into the topic.

“Oh, Marcus!” Chippy said, noticing my presence. “Christmas dab?” pointing to me and then to Colin. “Christmas dab?” he repeated, before he looked to June and asked the same.

“What time is it?” I asked, not thinking to look at the clock that ticked directly above my head.

“Uhh, looks like about nine,” Chippy replied, squinting at the ever moving hands.

“Yeah, sure, I’m down for a dab,” I replied. “But do you know where Renee is?”

“She came down about an hour ago,” Colin said. “And I think she’s taking a shower now. She’ll probably be done shortly after we are.”

We went outside, the dogs skipping and barking as they jumped at fresh flakes of snow. Chippy pulled out a thin metal pipe and miniature propane torch from his pocket, along with a tiny glass jar containing a yellow wax. He lit

up the torch with a spark and a sudden belch of flame erupted before it settled into a steady blue point. He held the torch to the tip of the pipe until it glowed a comfortable orange, at which he turned it off and held the pipe to the wax, inhaling as he did.

“Whew!” he let out, a wisp of white smoke passing through his lips as a shiver crawled over him. “Happy Birthday baby Jesus,” he said, handing the things to Colin before entering a terrific fit of coughing, hacking, and spitting.

Once Colin finished, he handed the tools to me. The wax bubbled and fizzed under the red glow of the pipe, a hot cloud of smoke hitting my lungs and throat that didn’t cause any discomfort until after I exhaled a large white plume of smoke, leaving me in a wheezing mess. Suddenly, everything slowed down, and I could take in every individual thing around me instead of just looking over everything at once. The way each snowflake found its own path in the breeze, twirling and spiraling down until it was lost amongst the others, a blob of conjoined individuals forming a single entity.

We walked back inside, my slippers now covered in a light dusting of snow, squeaking and slipping against the

linoleum as I meandered over to the stovetop, entranced by the savory aromas. Kaiser stood there, picking at a few pieces of bacon before he abruptly left, more pieces in hand.

“You want a plate?” Colin said from behind me, opening up a cupboard of dishes.

He handed one to me and I shoveled down sausages and eggs, most of the bacon having disappeared already. Even though most of the food had grown cold, I still enjoyed and licked up every scrap of it, soon finding myself with a clean plate and a full stomach. Colin, oddly enough, had none of the meal he prepared, instead opting for a simple bowl of oatmeal and more coffee.

“Mmm!” Chippy exclaimed. “Colin, you really got to have some of this, it’s great,” shoveling another bite into his already bursting mouth.

“No thanks,” Colin said, sipping his coffee. “I’ll just stick to this. Better for my digestion, I think,” taking a small bite of the gray mash before pushing it aside to gaze at his phone screen.

Once I finished, I began wandering around the house as I waited for Renee to emerge from the shower. I hadn't really taken the time before then to examine and appreciate all the antiques and pieces of art displayed around the house. In the kitchen, above the sink, hung an old print of a young girl and boy laughing on a seesaw as two border collie puppies ran around them. The grandfather clock in the foyer was filled with little wooden and glass elephants, all of varying shapes and sizes. Two paintings also hung in the foyer, 'Diver Down' and 'Dogwood Ghost', both by Zach Babat. I wasn't sure if they were prints or originals, but they were beautiful regardless. The first was of a kingfisher, diving with excellent precision to snag one of the several vibrant rainbow trout that swam just below the surface. The second was of a white owl, gracefully carving through a flurry of ivory petals, its massive and wise eyes alert and privy to every minute detail in its pathway. This one was more haunting to me, yet still wonderful. Not only its name, but the subject itself harkened back to that accidental killing, a crime that we all seemed to easily brush over and forget. It clung to me then, and it clings to me still in some odd, vague way.

“Hey!” Matt said, barging into the foyer. “You think you can help me gather some firewood?”

“Yeah, for sure,” I said, pulling myself away from the two paintings.

Kaiser met up with us outside, wearing a long charcoal coat and red scarf while smoking from a fat cigar, looking like a character from Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie. The storm began to pick up, dark clouds rolling in and blocking out the sun as new snow pounded down. We trudged to the edge of the treeline through the deepening snow where an old rickety shack stood. It took me a moment to realize that this was the same shack I saw during my trip in the mountains, and the fact that it was all the way down here only added more questions to the collection that came from that night.

“Here, Marcus, hold the door open, would you?” Kaiser said as he lifted the latch. “Thing has a nasty habit of swinging shut and locking when you’re not looking.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, grabbing and leaning against the door as the two of them each picked up an armload of firewood.

Once one of them could hold the door again, I picked up my own, and we headed back to the house.

We walked in, the screen door slamming shut behind us as we brushed past the others and pressed forth into the parlor where a small fire built in the fireplace. Remus ran up and licked at my shoes and heels as I threw down the bundle of firewood, clanging and clattering against the stone.

“Marcus,” I heard Renee say from out of my immediate view. “Merry Christmas!”

She looked simply wonderful. Her dark hair, slightly wet and appearing darker still, clung to her pale skin and wrapped around her thin neck. “Well, aren’t you going to wish me a merry Christmas back?”

“Merry Christmas,” I muttered before embracing her. She smelled sweet of jasmine and lilac. “How was your shower?”

“Oh, it was great,” she muttered back, her lips just barely moving.

We embraced for a moment, and I kissed her while holding her tightly until Chippy stumbled into the room, unintentionally interrupting us.

“Hey,” he said in a long, droning voice. “You know, it doesn’t really feel that Christmassy, you know?” In fact, none of us knew what he was talking about. “I think something is missing,” he said, looking around the room pensively.

“So, how’d you sleep?” Renee said, trying to ignore Chippy.

“Better than I can recall, I think.”

“Oh?” she said, her face pulling together to one of concern.

“I got it!” Chippy said, experiencing his own eureka moment. “There’s no tree!”

“No tree?” a few of the others repeated.

“Yeah, there’s no Christmas tree!” Holding his arms out to reveal a large empty corner of the room.

“Oh, shit!” Kaiser said. “You’re right! Well, come on!” he said with a wave of his hand. “Let’s go get a tree!”

We all gathered our things, pulled on our boots, and slung on our coats. A burst of wind and ice met us as we opened the door, the storm having grown tenfold since last we saw. Kaiser's red scarf blew and wavered against the wind and occasionally snagged on the saw slung over his shoulder, a banner we all followed as we trudged forward through the storm.

After about twenty minutes, we came across a small evergreen that looked like it would suit our purposes well. It was about seven feet tall, and perfectly full of branches and needles, all except for a spot on its back that had grown bare.

"Oh, this won't do at all!" Chippy proclaimed.

"What?" Erin said. "I think it's a fine tree."

"But look! There's nothing back here!" showing us it's bare backside. "Come on, let's keep looking."

"No," Jonathan said, throwing a cigarette butt to the ground. "I agree with Erin. This one will do fine."

Kaiser slung the saw into the snow. "No, no. I'm gonna have to take Chippy's side on this one. It's far too bare."

“We’re not taking sides,” Jonathan firmly stated. “We’re getting this tree, and that’s that. We’ve been out in this blizzard for nearly a half hour and I think most of us want to get back to the house soon.”

Kaiser looked back at the tree. “But what about the bare spot?”

“Jesus Christ!” Colin spat impatiently, shivering violently where he stood. “Look, just cut the damn thing down! The bare spot can face the wall. It’s not that fucking hard!” taking the final drag from his cigarette.

“Shut up, Campbell,” Kaiser said, lifting the saw back up. “Why don’t you go back to the house like last night.”

Colin shot up, mouth open to say something, but he bit down on his lip and turned away, trying to calm down with a fresh cigarette. Kaiser began cutting the tree down, sawing back and forth as chunks of wood and dust caught in the wind and blew about in the air and all around us.

“God fucking damn it!” Colin shouted as he threw his lighter into the snow. “Does anyone have a fucking light? I’m freezing my ass off and can’t light this damn thing!”

“Here, use mine,” Jonathan said, tossing him his silver lighter without looking away from Kaiser.

Colin struggled with it for a moment, his fingers fumbling around before saying, “Damn it! Didn’t you hear a word I said? I-”

“Here, I got it,” I said, taking the Zippo from his shaky hands and lighting his cigarette.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, taking the lighter from me and handing it back to Jonathan without a word.

Soon the tree fell down with a light thud against the snow, blowing up a cloud of powder as Sjur said, “Timber,” with dead enthusiasm.

Kaiser drug the tree all the way back to the house, and once we all got inside, the dogs barking and yipping their greetings as we walked in, he threw it onto the kitchen floor before saying, “Here. Merry Christmas,” and stormed out of the room.

“Come on, let’s get this thing in the parlor,” Jonathan said as he walked in and kicked off his boots.

He picked up one end while Sjur and I got the other and guided it into the corner of the parlor. Once it was properly erected, it filled the room with a sudden Christmas spirit previously unperceived. “Ahh, that’s it,” Chippy said, inspecting the room. “Christmas has come.”

Over the next couple hours, we wrapped our gifts and placed them under the tree before filling it with ornaments and decorations. Erin, Colin, Sjur, and June cut out paper snowflakes and chains of people while Chippy and Matt searched for things to put in it, finding some strings, lights, and a star they fashioned out of tinfoil. We listened to Christmas songs while the dogs ran around us and Jonathan stoked and maintained the fire while sipping at a glass of scotch.

“And a beer in a tree!” Chippy and Matt sang, laughing as they placed a Melvin IPA into the very heart of the tree.

“Bitch ass!” he said, proudly observing the grandeur of his creation.

“Merry Christmas,” Erin said, embracing him from behind, the fire now crackling and spitting embers as it filled the room with its flickering glow.

“Merry Christmas babe,” he replied, turning around and kissing her on the forehead as he pulled her in tight.

It was strange how fast moods could change in that house, and once they changed, they spread throughout like a weed, infecting and taking everyone under its control whichever way it went. In this moment and with these people I was happy. And looking back after everything that happened, I still can’t help but smile, as even though terrible things happened, things that still haunt me to this day, there were also some of the best moments in my life, and I wouldn’t want to change that or pretend otherwise.

“Drinks anyone?” Colin said, wearing a marijuana smirk as he passed out coffee cup mimosas.

“Mmm, thanks!” Chippy said, taking one and gulping it down. “Ahh!” he stated. “That hits the spot. We should get some crackers or something,” looking around for a tray of snacks.

I looked out into the foyer and saw Renee standing alone next to the old grandfather clock, minutes ticking by next to her. I walked over, clutching the gift in my pocket before

saying, “Merry Christmas Renee,” handing her the small bundle.

“Marcus,” she said, taking it. “Thank you,” unwrapping it slowly, taking care not to rip the paper as her snowman fingernails peeled it open. “Oh, they’re wonderful. Thank you.” Holding one up to the light. “But weren’t you supposed to leave it under the tree for someone to pick?”

“I have another gift for that,” I said. “Those are for you.”

Her smile enchanted me, but I became aware of someone standing behind me, chuckling slightly. It was Chippy, giggling like a schoolkid with Erin close behind him.

“Well, go on!” Chippy said. “Look up!”

I looked up and saw a tiny sprig of mistletoe dangling from his long boney fingers. “Where’d you find that?” I said before Renee placed her hand on my cheek.

“Don’t question it,” she said before leaning in and kissing me with her smooth lips.

Later on, Colin pulled the turkey out of the oven, sizzling with juices bubbling from the bottom of the pan, lifting up into the air in great wafts of steam. Chippy took a bottle of

champagne and popped the cork out into the blizzard as the rest of us watched from the screen door of the kitchen.

“Holy shit!” he said as he stomped back inside, bottle fizzing in his hand as the wind howled. “Its fucking cold!”

We all laughed and welcomed him back into the house before the warmth could escape. Colin and Jonathan got to work carving and serving the turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy and green beans, and shortly after they started, Kaiser finally joined us.

“Kaiser, can you grab some more plates out of the cupboard?” Jonathan said, pointing across the room.

“Yeah, sure thing,” Kaiser said, his mood seemingly mended. “I got a whole stack right here.”

Once everyone filled their plates, we brought them out not to the dining room mind you, but rather the parlor, the center of that Christmas spirit. We sprawled out around the bearskin rug, the fireplace, and the Christmas tree, any ills we harbored being quelled before they could surface.

“No Remus!” Chippy said. “This is mine, mine! Yours is in the kitchen!” he said before feeding him a slice of turkey.

Colin sat next to the grand piano, tapping and playing with the keys, amusing himself as we all chatted. “Does anyone actually know how to play this thing?” he said.

“You don’t?” I said, quite surprised as I remembered his bass skills.

“Unfortunately, no,” he said, pushing down on a long sour note.

“Well, Kaiser knows how to,” Jonathan said, sipping on his whiskey. “Don’t you?”

“Can you play for us?” Erin asked.

“Ehh, it’s been years since I’ve played,” Kaiser said, adjusting himself in his seat as he puffed on a cigar.

“Oh, do please,” Renee added.

And after a few more pleas from around the room, Kaiser reluctantly got up and meandered over to the piano. “Alright,” he said. “Only because you all asked.” he stretched and shook out his arms like they had fallen asleep before he whipped them back in place, hovering just above the keys. He plunged his fingers down and proceeded to play and sway with a relatively complex piece of classical

music, looking like he had finally come home for the first time in who knows how long. Tiny melodies and deep energetic stanzas lifted from the piano and floated around our ears. Sure, he made plenty of mistakes and it wasn't uncommon for him to fumble his way through a section, but those weren't the parts that stuck, those were just stones in an ocean of melodic melancholy.

"That was beautiful," Renee said when he concluded.

"Yeah," Sjur said, and I'm pretty confident in saying that we all felt the same way. "Can you play anything else? One more song?"

"Okay," Kaiser said, slipping back into the seat. "I haven't played this in a while, but I used to know it well. Chippy, you may know it," he said, but it was Jonathan who showed a smile, flickering across his face as he stopped and his eyes went mellow. He already knew what song he was going to play.

Kaiser started playing, a far more happy and carefree song flowing from his fingers this time. A jovial piece, full of life and memories that Jonathan seemed to get lost in, silently

mouthing the words that Kaiser and Chippy soon sang aloud.

“There’s a road I’d like to tell you about, lives in my hometown. Lake Shore Drive, the road is called and it’ll take you up or down. From rats up on to riches, fifteen minutes you can fly. Pretty blue lights along the way, help you right on by.”

Sjur laughed and began clapping along as Matt Googled and mumbled his way through the lyrics. Even Colin forgot everything from before and joined in, no one free from its grasp. We were happy, too happy, all of us there laughing and singing together while the fire crackled, the dogs whimpered, and the wind howled outside.

“Sometimes you can smell the green, if your mind is feeling fine!” Chippy sang, smoking an imaginary blunt. “There ain’t no finer place to be, then running Lake Shore Drive.”

Kaiser still messed up every once in a while and skipped over some of the harder parts, but unlike the first piece he merely knew, this one he loved. He stood up for a moment while playing, smiling while his fingers performed better than he remembered before he roared with laughter.

“Just slippin’ on by on LSD, Friday night, trouble bound.”

That last line stung me, bringing back memories of the previous nights, sobering me for a second before they were gone.

Once the song concluded, Kaiser got up and sat back in his chair across the room, the joy of the moment lingering for a bit before fading with the fire until only embers and memories remained.

“Why don’t we open gifts?” June suggested, petting Lady with Matt in the corner of the room.

“Mmm, bet!” Chippy said, getting up from his chair while hitting Colin’s vape mod. “Big bet,” he repeated, bending down to pick up the small gifts placed around the tree. “Here, everyone take one, just don’t take yours,” he said with a beaming smile.

We each picked a gift and started opening them up in a circle, June starting with a six-pack of beer from Matt, followed by Matt and Renee, who both received sweaters. Matt’s was one with a simple UJR logo gifted by Sjur while Renee’s was one with a mural of a grouping of elk and a wolf’s head howling at the moon, a gift from Kaiser. I

received a black scarf and a flask of whiskey and Colin nodded his head, letting me know it was from him. I began to feel a bit embarrassed by the gift I gave, and when Kaiser opened it, he just uttered a small “thanks,” before shoving it in his pocket and moving on to Jonathan who received an equally invigorating pair of Christmas socks from Erin.

“Sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t think of what to get.”

Colin was shocked to find both a bottle of red wine and a large roll of summer sausage, both generously gifted by Renee. “Why don’t we open these up right now?” he said before asking Kaiser to open the bottle with his new opener.

As Kaiser opened it, Chippy opened his gift from June, a few packs of Swisher Sweets and Backwoods. “Oh, sweet!” he said. “Bitch ass! We can roll one of these bad boys up tonight!”

Kaiser handed the bottle back to Colin, and June opened up her gift, pleasantly surprised at what she found. “You know, I’ve kinda always wanted one of these,” she said,

holding up a black fountain pen with intricate golden engravings on its surface.

“That’s from me,” Jonathan said. “Figured someone would get some use out of it.”

“Well, thank you,” she said, placing it back into the box.

The last one to open their gift was Sjur, and when he opened it, a smile came to his face. “Oh, a brownie!” he said.

“Oh, but that’s not just any brownie,” Chippy said. “But a special Christmas brownie.”

“Oh?”

“Christian,” Erin said in a disappointed tone. “Sjur, it has weed in it.”

“Oh,” he said, looking down at it, neatly wrapped and all. “Ehh, I don’t think I want any of it.”

“Oh, but you don’t have to have much,” Chippy interjected. “We can all split it and have just a little, that’s kinda the idea.”

“Yeah, but I just don’t think I really want any. You guys can have some though,” Sjur said, handing the small package to Chippy. “I’m probably going to go to bed soon anyways.”

Sjur left shortly after, walking out of the room while saying goodnight before leaving upstairs. A few of us answered, but most stayed quiet. If I still held any guilt over my gift, it was insurmountably dwarfed by the cloud that hung over Chippy.

“Look, how was I supposed to know he’d get it?” he pleaded.

“Chippy, it was a bad idea. Why would you give that if he could get it?” Erin said.

“Well, to be fair, I don’t think it was a bad gift,” surprisingly coming from Jonathan. “He could have just as likely gotten any one of the gifts that contained alcohol.”

“You should have put something else in there with it,” Kaiser chimed in. “Like Renee and Colin did, that way he could still have something to enjoy.” reigniting the tip of his cigar. “Personally, I think we should have agreed to no alcohol or drugs as gifts for that reason.”

“Well, that’s helpful now,” Chippy replied.

“Yeah, and I didn’t realize that our Christmas was planned around Sjur,” June murmured.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kaiser said. “We’re all here! It was for all of us!”

I left them bickering and babbling as I myself meandered slowly through the parlor, up the stairs, and to my room for the night. I often wish that I had stayed up later. Maybe once the argument cooled down, we would have played some games, laughing until 3 am; or maybe we would have just chatted and reminisced about classes and fall semester, planning trips and adventures to go on in the spring, but I went to bed, leaving those times abandoned.

Five.

If there is one thing that Montana is notorious for, it would be its long and bitter winters. Deep snow, freezing temperatures, and wild blizzards that come with little warning, and while in the plains they could leave just as abruptly, up in the mountains they did no such thing. And if there was one thing we were to learn, it was that you never underestimate the ferocity of a Montana winter.

I awoke late on the 26th to the wind howling horrifically outside my window. The cold crept into the house and hung in my breath, my lungs, my muscles, and bones, aching and scraping against each other because of it. The stairs creaked and groaned under my weight, echoing in long moans of discomfort. The back screen door smacked violently against its wooden frame, once, twice, three times. I could hear Jonathan, Matt, and possibly Kaiser chatting in the parlor, seemingly oblivious to the screen door's self destruction.

I stumbled into the kitchen and fetched myself a cup of hot coffee, Lady eyeing me from the floor where she comfortably lay as the screen door continued to batter

itself again and again. By the time I finished my first cup, lazily sipping it as I gazed out the frost covered sink window, I decided to close the door myself before I found that quite impossible, as whoever used it last seemingly broke the sliding lock, letting it flap freely. To remedy this, I simply moved an old flower pot in front of the door, holding it closed, at least for now as the wind rattled on.

“Marcus,” Kaiser said from behind me, lifting the pot of coffee from its warmer and pouring himself a mug. “Morning,” sipping cautiously at his steaming cup. “Ugh, that snow just isn’t going to let up, is it?”

“Probably not,” I said, sitting down at the table. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Oh, they went outside to do… something, I’m not really sure, but if you ask me, I think some of them needed to get out,” starting up a cigarette as he sat down.

“Who?” I asked. “Because I’d be freezing my ass off out there.”

Kaiser laughed and leaned back into his chair, taking a long luxurious drag before he blew out a cloud of heavy smoke and said, “Well, Colin for one. I mean, you’ve seen

how he’s been acting the last few days.” he readjusted himself again, elbows on the table, leaning closer to me and lowering his voice to a near whisper. “I mean, he’s always fucking drunk!”

“Well, I don’t know about-”

“Yeah, yeah,” waving a dismissive hand. “But nearly. I mean, when was the last time you saw him sober? Have you seen him sober?” I barely had enough time to think before he continued on, looking out into the foyer before saying, “And I can’t fucking stand Jonathan right now. Colin may be annoying, but at least he isn’t watching over every fucking thing I do.” He exhaled sharply, taking a hasty drag as he looked out into the foyer again. “I mean, he’s a fucking control freak. I can’t do a goddamn thing without him correcting or shutting me down.” He got up and stood next to the window, gazing out as he took short sporadic drags from his cigarette. “He’s always got to be right. I mean, you saw how he treated me the night before last,” turning to me without pulling his gaze from the window. “I mean, he fucking hit me! And-” he said before cutting himself off, holding his cigarette still as he continued to

gaze out the window. “Wait, who’s that?” he said, moving closer to the glass. “That can’t be Dean Hall, could it?”

I got up and walked over to the window. A tiny blue car wobbled down the driveway, slowly inching its way towards the house before it came to a stop. “No, can’t be him,” I replied.

Out of the driver’s side hopped a young lady, carrying two large bags in her hands as she slammed the door shut and walked up towards the house. Kaiser and I moved to the foyer and found Jonathan already there, waiting by the door. We stood silent for a moment before there was a sudden knock, at which Jonathan opened the door with little hesitation.

“Can I help you?” he said, cracking it just enough to peek his face out.

“Oh, hi! Yes, I’m Sarah Walther,” she said in a chipper voice, as if that somehow explained things.

“Okay,” Jonathan replied in his own, slow and deliberate. “And can I help you?”

“Oh! Umm, well yes, I’m the house sitter.”

Jonathan opened the door wider. “You’re the house sitter?” he said, both Kaiser and I now visible behind him. “You’re pretty late then.”

Just then we heard something break in the kitchen, followed by the dogs barking and several pairs of footsteps. I quickly left the two of them there with her as I checked out the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” I heard Matt say, storming out into the foyer from some previously undisclosed position as I left.

I found what broke was the flower pot I placed in front of the door, now laying scattered in a hundred pieces on the floor. Erin and June were there too, Erin hastily picking up pieces of broken pottery as June blew past me, both of them seemingly frantic.

“Sjur!” June called. “Marcus, have you seen Sjur?”

“No,” I replied as she ran out of the room. “Hey, wait a second. What’s going on?”

“It’s Sjur!” Erin said. “He’s missing!”

The next hour was a complete jumbled mess, half a dozen people running around the house grabbing anything that

could remotely help in a search while Jonathan interrogated our new arrival in the dining room with Kaiser. “How do you know Dean Hall?” and “Are you currently a student at UJR?” were just some of the unnecessary questions he threw at her. I don’t even know what information he was trying to get or how he thought this would help anything. He looked like little more than a kid playing cop, the way he sat across the table from her, Kaiser by his side as he cooly collected himself and took sips of coffee, asking endless superfluous questions that got nowhere and revealed even less.

“And your major then,” he said, right foot resting on his knee as he took another long sip. “What is that?”

“Sociology, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“Oh, what a coincidence,” Jonathan said, swinging his leg back down while he removed a cigar from his jacket. “And if you must know it has little relevance, I’m merely curious.”

His game with our new arrival was little more than a distraction from the much more important matter of finding Sjur. Sjur had gone out with everyone else that morning,

and after about a half an hour, he left the group to relieve himself in the forest, after which he never resurfaced. Sjur obviously hadn't been drinking or smoking, and we were able to follow his tracks for a while, but soon they became sparse and eventually impossible to find again as more of us came out to search, mixing his tracks with our own. If Jonathan really wanted to use his detective skills, they would have been far more welcome outside than in.

Kaiser quickly grew tired of Jonathan's game and came out to help aid in the search, trudging out through the snow in his heavy overcoat, fists plunged deep into the pockets. "Where did you see him last?" and "How long ago did he go missing?" were questions he frequently produced. "He couldn't have gone too far, could he?"

"I don't know, but how could he not hear us?" I said before we both began calling his name once more.

The wind quickly picked up, blowing through the trees and rattling their branches like the wind chimes of a forest crone, cutting us down to the marrow. Heavy flakes twirled and fell down, covering up the tracks we left in the snow along with any that remained from Sjur, leaving only a blank canvas of snow. Some of us headed back to the house

throughout the day, only to return later with blankets and runny noses, but they returned all the same.

It was terribly depressing when the sun went down with the wind and snow blowing just as hard, if not worse than before. Admitting defeat wasn't easy, and many of us had to be nearly dragged back into the house as the temperature dropped to negative twenty degrees, snow and sleet hammering on, burying the earth in a torrent of white glaze.

"Come on, we have to find him, he's going to freeze out in this!" Kaiser said, pulling away from Jonathan's grasp as he tried to go back outside. "He could die!"

"And so can you!" Jonathan said. "There's no way you can safely look for him out in this blizzard. You'll only get lost yourself."

"Stop it, Jonathan!" Kaiser spat, whipping around and smacking away Jonathan's hand. "I'm being serious!"

There was a brief bout of silence before Jonathan shrugged and walked away. "Fine," he said. "Do what you want."

“Here,” Matt said, taking Jonathan’s place in the mudroom. “I wanna go too. We can use this,” holding out the flashlight he bought the week prior.

I decided to go back out as well. Even though I was already frozen, and the storm was only going to get worse, there was no way I was going to just let the two of them go out alone, much less stand by and let whatever happened to Sjur happen without at least trying.

As we stomped back into our boots and flung on our coats, an intoxicated Colin stumbled into the room like clockwork, sucking on a flask of whiskey. “Hey,” he let out in a long draw. “I’m going out with you guys too.”

“No, you’re not,” Kaiser retorted, stamping down and tying his boot in a muddy puddle. “You’re drunk Colin, you’ll only make things more dangerous.”

“Fuck you, Kaiser!” Colin said, leaning forward with his shifting weight. “Fuck you. Sjur’s out there freezing to death and I’m going to go get him with you guys.”

Kaiser grumbled but did little else and within five minutes, we were all back outdoors in the swirling cacophony of frost, snow, and darkness. The snow was falling so heavily

now you could scarcely see ten feet ahead, and making it to the treeline took nearly twenty minutes in itself. The trees huddled around us and shivered violently.

“Are you going to turn that thing on!” Kaiser shouted, his voice carrying a mere five feet before it too was engulfed by the snow.

“Yeah, I just wanted to get out of the brunt of the storm first,” Matt said, flicking the light on.

Immediately, the entire forest was bathed in a dead white light, each snowflake reflecting back at us like a million tiny stars. It was like daylight entered that section of the forest, every detail revealed and brought into the forefront even more so than that morning.

“Holy shit,” Colin said. “You didn’t tell us it was so bright.”

“Well, that’s why I got it,” he replied.

After about twenty minutes, we found something small poking out of the snow. At first it looked like a squirrel or some other small creature foraging on the forest floor, but once we got closer, we realized it was a piece of black

cloth, tugged along with the breeze that tore through the branches of the forest.

“What is it?” Colin asked as Kaiser retrieved the garment illuminated by Matt’s light. “Is it Sjur’s?”

“I don’t think so,” Kaiser said, revealing a ratty frozen shirt. “But it could be.”

“Let me see it,” Colin said, stretching his swaying arm out.

“Here,” Kaiser said, handing it over.

Colin looked over the shirt for a moment, examining its tag before saying, “I think Sjur had a shirt just like this. Come on, let’s go this way.”

For some reason, this statement from Colin actually made me feel less sure about the shirt’s authenticity, and I think the others felt the same way, and maybe even Colin himself was only saying this to give us some sort of feeling of hope where there was none.

He soon led us to a spot where the trees cleared out, opening up into a slope that carried on down the mountainside.

“Come on Colin, he’s not here,” Matt said.

“No, just let me look for a second,” Colin said, leaning over and looking down the slope as his body swayed precariously with the wind.

Kaiser went to grab Colin’s arm, but Colin shot up faster than he may have realized and lost his balance. “Shit!” He said before his foot slipped, sending him arms whirling down the slope.

“Fucking goddamn it, Colin!” Kaiser said, running down after him.

Luckily, the slope was gradual, and Colin was able to catch himself before he went tumbling further down into the rocks and trees.

“Shit, are you okay?” I said as I ran up.

He sat holding a foot, rocking back and forth in the snow while I bent down to help him to his feet.

“I think I may have broke my ankle,” he said, letting out a small whimper of pain as I lifted him back up.

“We need to get back to the house,” I said. “We can’t keep searching out in this, or something far worse than a broken ankle is going to happen.”

All three issued their own protests, but within a few minutes we were headed back to the house, nothing more could be done that night. It turned out that Colin merely twisted his ankle, and although he was still in great pain, he was able to carry himself back to the house once we reached the treeline again.

We got back inside and found everyone sitting in the parlor, everyone except our new arrival, whom we learned had gone upstairs for the night. A fire burned and illuminated the room in a dark glow that touched the red mahogany interior, welcoming us from the storm. But it was no longer the intimate and warm place I came to know, something stirred it to silence and chilled its heart. Jonathan sat in his usual chair, composed and stoic, staring into the fire as he swirled a glass, Lady by his side, though he paid her no attention. Matt sat down next to June, quietly speaking to her for a moment before they both sat in silence. Kaiser helped Colin into a chair and fetched him

a glass of Scratched Cask Scotch, but after that not a word was said between them.

Renee walked up to me and embraced me tightly, not wishing to let go. “How are you?” she asked, her eyes glassy as tears rolled uncontrollably down her cheek and onto her knit sweater.

It was something I mentioned before, how foreign transfer students seemed to share a special bond. At first I thought it was like any other group, a collection of friends and people who got along, but not much more. Unlike others though, they traveled the world to get here, leaving the safety and comfort of familiarity for the unknown adventure they shared in, and now it came crashing down.

I couldn’t think of an answer to her question, and so I just repeated it back to her. She looked up at me and opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out was the short stifled sound of her choking on her words. I hugged her again, and we sat down next to the fire, her hands clenched in mine.

If Renee was crying, which she was, then Chippy was bawling. His eyes flushed red as he sat curled up in the

corner of the room, Erin there next to him, but like Jonathan with Lady, he paid her no mind. I never thought I could see him like that. “It’s my fault,” he kept saying to himself. “If I just hadn’t- maybe he’d-”

“No,” Erin would say. “No, don’t say that Christian,” but he just kept gazing on into the fire, the one thing we all seemed to look to for answers, but nothing came from it except heat and the recognition of the cold.

The entire night of Sjur’s disappearance, I tossed over and over in my bed to the sound of the walls creaking and groaning from the cold. ‘Rat-tat-tat, rat-tat-tat, rat-tat-tat!’ I’ve always been a light sleeper, but I never really had problems falling asleep until that night. What made it worse was every time I turned over in my bed I’d look over and see Colin, seemingly fast asleep, as if to spite my own condition. And as the wind and wails carried on, the snow piling up as the hours crawled by, all I could think of was Sjur out in those woods, lost, cold.

When I sat up in the morning, I noticed my breath hanging out in front of me like a ghost before I saw the frost that gathered in the corners of my room. I stumbled down the stairs at no later than five in the morning. Matt was up and sitting at the bottom, welcoming me down, but not much after.

I walked outside. The wind was still bad, but not like it was during the night. I watched the birds, unbothered by the coming of winter as they chirped and flirted, dancing as they wandered away from the house and to the edge of the forest. I stood there for a moment, gazing into its depths before it overtook me and I had to turn away, shuddering back to the house as the wind picked up and swept beneath my feet.

I found Chippy smoking a cone out front, just as restless as myself, staring down the driveway wondering, praying, hoping. “Marcus,” he said, greeting me in his characteristic way, but it lacked his usual enthusiasm, and I could tell he was distraught, eating himself alive with guilt. He teared up a bit and suddenly embraced me, not tightly though, like he was hesitant to get that close. “You sleep well?” he said, sniffling his running nose as he pulled back.

“Yeah,” I lied. “I woke up cold though. Everything’s colder now.”

“I woke up cold too, actually,” he said. “Well, not at first. I actually woke up sweating, but then it was cold. But it’s better now, you know. You wanna hit?” offering me the joint as he wiped his nose with his sleeve.

“Sure,” I said, taking it and inhaling deeply, letting it wash away my thoughts and replace them with new ones. “Thanks,” I said, handing it back.

He smoked the last of it and turned to go inside. “You know, it’s pretty nice out today,” he said, looking back out at the property, smiling, before he turned to go back inside the house.

This confused me, and though I still don’t fully understand what he meant by saying that, I think he was just hoping Sjur was alright and might walk down the driveway any second, but misplaced hope would not bring him back.

Matt stood in the foyer and welcomed us back, ushering us to the game room, though I lingered for a moment. I looked at the Dogwood Ghost, its eyes wise and fortune telling,

and it gave me a premonition, one too dark and terrible to bear, so I left and chased after the others.

June stood mindlessly shooting balls into the pockets of the billiard table, the only sound being their occasional cracks while Erin sat in a corner to herself. She welcomed Chippy, but after their short greeting they were apart again, and she was alone.

We sat down there for a while, shooting pool and playing poker like we did in the dorms of UJR, but this was different; nobody expressed anything, not victory or defeat, like everyone had already lost. I remember when we played these games on the campus, it was always a joyous and comedic affair, but this wasn't like that, it was merely a misplaced memory of those times.

Colin came down some time later, informing us that they were having lunch, some meager turkey sandwiches, leftovers from Christmas. We took the sandwiches but brought them downstairs, eating them in the silence of the dark, the party broken.

Slowly, one by one, we all left, Erin at first, saying she wished to continue her painting. June left next, followed by

Matt and finally Chippy, saying he should be with Erin. I eventually left as well while time drifted past me, oddly uncompromised.

I awoke around four or five in my room. I must have fallen asleep. Colin was what awoke me, or who I should say. He seemed to be searching for something, digging through his bags and slamming drawers like he was desperate, but when I asked what he was looking for, he did not answer. He left soon afterwards, limping out the door, his foot still aching from the night before. I looked out the window. The sun was already setting.

We had dinner, a nice soup that Colin prepared utilizing one of the quails caught weeks earlier. But it tasted bitter, and moods soured as fights broke out between parties and soon only a few of us remained.

“What do you mean you haven’t called the cops yet?” Kaiser exclaimed. “He’s missing out there and most likely dead! What the fuck are you doing?” but Jonathan remained upright and undisturbed.

Erin and others issued their complaints to Jonathan, leaving as they did until it was only him and I remaining.

Renee had been quiet throughout the entire meal and she left with Erin. I hadn't seen her all day, and she went to bed soon afterwards.

"Marcus," Jonathan addressed me. He took off his glasses and pulled a little silver case out of his coat pocket. At once, I knew what it was. He clicked it open and revealed the white powder that hid inside. He took a small rolled up note he packaged with it and snorted a line. "Do you want any?" he said, offering me the small package. "It's the only way I can seem to maintain a grip on myself."

I took the set of instruments and inhaled a line myself, considerably smaller than his, but still enough to affect someone who's never experienced it before. I handed them back to him, my own hands steady like his now.

"I've been meaning to ask you," he said, placing the small case back into his coat pocket. "Would you join me on a trip to Germany, possibly this spring?"

I was completely taken off guard and baffled by this question. "Well, aren't you going to have Kaiser?" I said.

"Well," he said. "I don't think so."

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t handle him anymore,” he said in a defeated tone, a tone I hadn’t heard him take before. “I don’t mean that I’ll be away from him. I just need a break. He’s too much sometimes. I need someone to lean on myself.”

“Well, I think I’m the wrong pick for that,” I said. “My financial situation is-”

“That doesn’t matter,” he said, waving his hand like he was clearing a slate. “I mean, I can get along with you. I don’t have to worry about you doing anything stupid cause I know you won’t. You’re not like that. You’re like me.”

The thing was, I didn’t feel anything like him. I didn’t care much about the things he cared about, and even though our studies may have been similar, I had far different aspirations. But I looked at him, and recognized something I hadn’t in a long time. Someone who was lonely, truly lonely. He spent all his time following and protecting this person he no longer understood, and now he needed someone to express that to, even if he couldn’t explicitly say it. “Yeah, I’d just need to make sure I have the money to afford it,” I joked.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” he said. “If that were, I don’t think I would have asked you,” he joked back. “Just don’t tell Kaiser about this. I don’t want him to know.”

We soon departed after this, each of us going our own way; Jonathan to go watch and be with Kaiser, and me to the giant bay window, watching the snowfall as the close came to another day.

The next morning, Jonathan finally called the cops. I was surprised no one had earlier, but I guess we were all waiting for him to do it. They arrived around nine, pulling up to the house in an outdated vehicle that whirred and clicked like an old steam engine.

“Can we speak to the homeowner?” Was the first thing they asked when I opened the door.

“Umm, well, he’s not here right now, and won’t be for a while. We’re house sitting the place for him. I’m Marcus by

the way," shaking the coarse hand of the first officer, officer Keel.

"Well, we're here because somebody reported a missing persons," the second officer said, the stout and lazy looking officer Norton. "May we come in?"

"Yes," I said, ushering them into the foyer. "And that was Jonathan," pointing to him, standing next to the staircase.

"How may I help you gentleman today?" he said, clasping his hands together.

"Yes," said officer Keel. "Firstly, I'd like to know-" he started before being cut off by the loud thumping of Kaiser's feet across the mezzanine hallway, and then by Colin entering the room and leaning on the grandfather clock.

"Excuse me, but how many of you are there?" officer Norton asked, shooting Jonathan a confused look.

"Well, ten. There was eleven of us until a few days ago."

"Ten!" officer Norton said. "Is the homeowner aware of this?" immediately trying to find any dirt where he could.

“Well, he’s the one who invited us here,” Jonathan replied in a cool, calm way.

“How much is he paying you?” officer Keel chimed in, his face pinched tightly together, resembling that of a mole or ferret. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Two thousand into our student accounts.”

“And you don’t find this… odd?”

“No, why should I?” looking at the two officers and examining them closely. “He does this every year.”

“Well, son,” the doughy Norton started. “That’s twenty-two thousand dollars, assuming he’s paying you all the same. And don’t you think eleven house sitters is a little… excessive?”

Jonathan was quiet for a moment, thinking up a proper response before settling on, “Well, it’s a very large place, over 300 acres, plus a cabin higher up. There’s a lot that needs to be done around here.”

For some reason, I thought this explanation wasn’t quite adequate, and it’s not like I didn’t think of those questions the officers asked before; in fact, I’d been asking myself

them since I got here. His answer appeased the cops though, and they moved on to questions relating to Sjur, but I suddenly became wrapped up in their first questions that repeated over in my mind, each time making less sense than the last. Why were there eleven of us? When I first arrived, Kaiser and Jonathan said there would be six, and even then, I thought that was a lot, but now we nearly doubled that. And twenty-two thousand dollars? That was as much as a renovation or an addition to the house. It was absurd. And if Jonathan told them about Sarah arriving shortly after Sjur disappeared they would have found this even more suspicious and might even suspect foul play of some sort, but Jonathan withheld this information from them, and none of us were too keen on letting it slip.

Jonathan led them outside, Colin trailing behind them and filling in the details that Jonathan couldn't. They walked around the yard and to the edge of the forest, conducting a small search around the premises before looping back around to the house.

"Unfortunately, we won't be able to conduct a search of the grounds today. We'll be back up here tomorrow though with a full team and we can conduct a more thorough

search then," officer Keel said. "I'll leave you with my card and you can give me a call if any new information pops up, otherwise we'll be back up here with a team tomorrow. We'll see you then. Take care and stay warm. It's bound to get pretty cold out here tonight."

They then departed, car rattling down the driveway as I shut the front door, letting one last gust of icy wind sneak in. Jonathan resumed his position in the parlor and didn't seem to be in any place to talk about things, instead opting for a stiff drink.

I found Colin in the kitchen, getting himself a cup of piping hot coffee and stirring in a spoonful of butter. "We're almost out of milk," he said, tapping the spoon on the rim of the mug. "Just a little bit left for dinner tonight, then we'll be out. I think I heard somewhere that butter in coffee is supposed to be good for you, clears your system or… something." He took a long sip before setting the steaming cup back down on the counter. "Hmm, actually isn't too bad. You want any?"

"No thanks," I said, looking at the odd iridescent film on its surface. "I'd actually prefer tea."

“Well, I think we have some apple cinnamon. Want me to make you a cup?”

“Sure,” I said.

“You hungry?” he said, placing a pot of water on the stovetop. “I already ate lunch, but I can make you some if you want.”

“No thanks,”

“Just tea then?”

“Yeah, just tea, thanks.”

A few minutes later, he handed me a steaming cup and I left. I wandered around the house, looking at the antique glass cabinets filled with curious dishes, valuables, and pieces of China until I finally meandered into the living room where Erin stood painting while Renee and Chippy observed. A muted sun’s rays carried in through the large windows of the room, bathing everything in a warm yet almost sickly yellow. The wind rattled the windowpanes, creating a consistent tapping sound that was only briefly interrupted by the words of Chippy and the scrapes of Erin’s brush.

“I think it needs more bright colors, babe,” Chippy said, mending a cone that started to canoe. “I like your brighter ones.”

I gazed at the canvas, deep blues and purples filled in the sky, a warm light cast on the snow from the gigantic bay windows of the living room. I don’t know why, but something about the painting made it look foreign, unfamiliar, unnatural. A cold tingle shot up my back, and a sense of dread overcame me; I couldn’t help but feel like her brush started to drip and blend into reality.

I turned and looked out the massive windows, still shaking with the violent gusts of wind. The sky was gray and overcast, dark storm clouds lurching forward as the wind picked up and carried across deep snow drifts, forming dunes and hills like the sands of the Sahara.

“Maybe you should make it daylight out, that’d be nice,” Chippy said.

Erin just let out a sigh and continued brushing. It was partly finished and there was no way she could change the sky without significantly altering what she’d done. It was to be a sunset.

I sat with Renee for a while, watching Erin fill in the canvas with dark shades of brown, gray, and black until finally the sun outside set, and her painting started to take form in the real world. She set her brush down and closed her paints. More work was yet to be done, but she finished for the day.

Over the next few days, we saw Officer Norton and Keel more often as they and many other officers searched the property and surrounding wilderness. At one point they even called in a helicopter that circled round the house and mountain in search of Sjur, but there was still no sign of him.

June and Matt basically operated in tandem at this point, moving and working as one as they passed between the two other groups, the Greenies and the Cufflinks. Chippy kept to himself, often smoking alone but not opposed to smoking with others when they were around. Renee would sometimes see me, but not as much as before. Jonathan mostly stuck with Kaiser, and Colin lingered around them,

the three often grouped but rarely expressing anything but desire for more tobacco and alcohol. Sarah Walther (our new arrival) was rarely seen outside her room. Erin continued her painting in the living room, leaving it only for meals, rest, and when we'd occasionally meet in the game room. Chippy was often there with her, but something separated them. He smoked and kept to himself as she painted and kept to herself, both of them reflecting on everything, but in their own ways. I still saw them as the perfect couple, Erin pushing Chippy to achieve more while he taught her to appreciate the moment, singular. But they were apart now, divulging in their own remedies and separating themselves from each other by their conclusions. I appreciated the arts. I wanted to be an artist after all, but Erin's art contrasted my own. Mine was more real and materialistic, while hers was vivid, wild with imagination, all her own. She would often look at me while she painted with charming eyes full of sorrow and passion. I always felt something with her, a kinship of sorts, like we both understood each other, more than I with Renee and her with Chippy. But we kept apart, me for her relationship and her for the one that grew between Renee and I. She was sweet though, and I felt like our mutual fondness for

the arts was a rare thing, something I wanted to embrace and share with her, but never could, and never did.

New Year's Eve night came too soon. I found Colin in the kitchen yet again; he seemed to always be in there, especially now. Two empty bottles sat on the table, a chardonnay and a merlot that's neck somehow broke.

"That bottle was a pain in the ass to open," he slurred out. "I broke my bottle opener on it."

I wondered how on earth he managed to do that and if there was an amusing story that went along with it, but he didn't delve any further into the topic. He continued standing there, toiling over a gravy he carefully stirred in a pan, though it wasn't until Erin spoke up that I noticed his hand.

"Colin, are you hurt? What happened?" pointing to his left hand that had been wrapped up in a towel.

Colin shot up and swayed back and forth as he looked over himself and down at it. “Oh, this? It’s fine. I just nicked myself on the glass, that’s all.”

“Are you sure it’s fine? Let me see it.”

Colin limped over, his foot still sore. “Yeah, it’s just a little scrape,” he said. “Here look,” unwrapping the bandage to reveal a large bloody cut that stretched from between his thumb and forefinger down across the palm of his hand. His face went white and beads of sweat collected on his forehead before he fell down into a chair. It wasn’t too deep and luckily nothing important was severed, but it didn’t look pretty.

“Here, hold still,” I said, examining it more closely. “I can’t see how bad it is, Chippy, can you get me a wet cloth?” I started to clean the wound before fresh blood began to trickle down from just above his thumb. “Do we have any peroxide?”

“I can check,” Erin said, rushing out of the room. She returned a few minutes later with some bandages and gauze, but no peroxide. “This is all I could find,” she said, handing them to me.

“Okay, can you get me a whiskey or something?” I asked, pointing to the shelf where Colin stashed most of his liquor. She handed me a bottle.

“Can I get some too?” Colin asked, his hand still in mine.

“Yeah,” I said, pouring him a small glass he quickly gulped down. “You ready?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, clearing his throat before I poured some onto his open cut. He jerked his hand away at first before he held it still again, letting a small hissing sound out through his teeth. “Ahh, god that burns!” he said.

I looked down at the cleaned wound. “Colin,” I said. “I think there’s a piece of glass still stuck in your hand.”

“Shit, really? Where?”

“Right here,” I said, holding the spot where a tiny piece of black glass stuck out. He cringed but kept his hand steady as I removed the small shard from his palm, a drop of blood coming from the gash, followed by a thin stream. “Can you hand me the gauze?” I asked Erin. Once she handed it to me, I took it and placed it on the cut before wrapping it all

tightly with the roll of bandages. “Keep it firmly wrapped,” I said to him. “It will keep the blood in.”

“Thanks,” he said. “You think you can help me with the rest of dinner? I’m just feeling a little queasy now, I guess,” holding and rocking his head back and forth. “Can you get me something to drink too?” he said as I stood up. “Something strong.”

I didn’t know how to mix any drinks, and I didn’t really want to give him something strong right now, as he already drank enough to hurt himself without noticing. I took a bit of the whiskey that was already out, put it on ice and watered it down considerably, handing it to him without telling him how it’d been altered.

He took a long sip. “Thanks,” he said, not noticing that it was mostly water he drank.

He’d been preparing a roast chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy. The chicken was a bit overcooked and dried out, but wasn’t beyond saving. The mashed potatoes had been left comfortably steaming in a pot, but the gravy clumped up and dried significantly, and after a long while we

worked it back into a liquid, but it remained considerably lumpy.

“Ack!” Kaiser spat, gulping down a large glass of water afterwards. “A bit dry, isn’t it?”

Other than Kaiser’s occasional complaints though, the table was silent. Colin sat, head low, nursing on his drink as the food he prepared for himself sat untouched. Jonathan puffed on his pipe, eating from his plate slowly as if he was savoring it and the moment though, clearly he wasn’t. Chippy and Erin hardly stayed for three minutes before they took their plates and left downstairs. Renee couldn’t seem to bear to look up from her plate and, like Colin, barely touched it. June didn’t even get a plate, just picked at Matt’s as he stared blankly off into space, only briefly returning to the table before he left us once again. It was as if we all suddenly didn’t know each other anymore and kept to ourselves during this sad, hollow affair.

After dinner, a few of us went down to the game room to play our usual game of poker. Matt, June, Chippy, Erin, Renee, and myself played a few hands in silence before Colin joined us, stumbling down the stairs in an inebriated stupor. He wandered over to a chair, jostling this way and

that before he collapsed into it, throwing his legs up in the air like he was on a swing. “Come on, let’s do something,” he said. “It’s New Year’s Eve.”

“Well, what do you wanna do?” June asked.

He paused for a minute. “I don’t know… I wanna listen to some jazz.” He got up and walked over to the stereo system, plugging in his phone before he started up a playlist of slow jazz at a low volume and resumed his place in his chair. “Ehh, I hate this song,” he said, getting up and changing it to one virtually indistinguishable from the last. “That’s nice,” he said, walking over and sitting in our circle at the table.

“Why don’t we play a game,” Matt said after a few moments.

“What kind of game?” Colin rolled out in a long draw.

“A drinking game.”

We started off by playing a few rounds of higher lower. Most of us were drinking beers, but Colin and Matt took shots of Fireball. I wondered how on earth Colin was able to drink that much and still move and talk coherently, and I

didn’t think he could handle much more, whether he wanted to or not. After a while, we were able to convince Colin to go down to a light beer, but he insisted that he wanted to stay in the game, and so kept drinking.

After about an hour of this, voices and music had grown progressively louder, merry even. We all were part of the moment and thoughts of what happened before were purged from our minds. It didn’t take long for the others to join in, Kaiser first, quickly remarking how happy we seemed before he joined in. Jonathan wandered down shortly after and joined us as well, though he still remained hesitant and reserved. Sarah also came down eventually, though she didn’t play any games, instead she wished to be left alone with her book in the room's corner, but I doubt she was able to read much at all.

“Come on, just one game?” Chippy called from across the room.

“No thanks, I’ll just watch,” Sarah insisted, fidgeting in her chair as she tried to continue reading.

“Come on,” Colin said. “You can’t just sit there, it’s New Year’s Eve.”

“Don’t bother,” Kaiser said, turning his back to her as he went back to the game. “She doesn’t want to play with us. Just let her be.”

Suddenly, Colin got up out of his chair and walked over to Sarah, stopping multiple times to regain his balance as he crossed the room. “Come on, come play a game,” he said, giving her arm a small tug with his bandaged hand.

“No!” she said, pulling her arm back.

“Colin, leave her alone,” Kaiser said, “She doesn’t want to play, so just forget it.”

Colin gave her arm one last feeble tug before she wrenched it back, causing him to recoil his hand in pain. He looked at her for a moment, a snarl growing on his face before he stomped back over to the table defeated.

We continued playing our game, and after a notoriously bad streak of luck on Jonathan’s part, we switched games to a much more conservative game of blow me, replacing the shot of liquor with beer. But the games continued on, and it wasn’t long before a couple cigars and joints were busted out and passed around the table in a communal circle.

At about forty minutes till midnight, Sarah did come over and join us after Chippy and Erin talked with her briefly.

“Are you going to play?” Colin asked.

“Umm, maybe,” she said nervously.

“Oh, great!” Colin said, suddenly leaving, only to return and hand her a beer. In his injured hand was the rest of the bottle of whisky. He opened it and took a long swig. “I’m going to start playing with shots again,” he slurred out. “I think we all should. Well, you don’t have to Sarah, you can just drink your beer.” He poured out a shot and set the deck on top of it with a shaky hand. He took another long sip from the bottle before he screwed on the cap with a set of satisfying clicks. “Whose turn was it?”

“Mine,” Jonathan said, too far gone to even get out of his chair.

“Well then, blow.”

We played a few more rounds, and most everyone was having a fairly good time, but we all began to feel nervous around Colin. The more he drank, the more he wanted to drink, and the more he wanted us to drink. Jonathan

actually started laughing quite loudly after he got stuck in an endless loop of shots, gargling down one after another only to surface, howling so hysterically that tears formed in his eyes. At first I wondered if he accidentally hit one of the spliffs being passed around, and he very well may have, but either way, it was apparent that more drinks weren't helping his situation. I'm not even sure that I ever heard Jonathan laugh besides then, but I knew his normal laugh couldn't be like this. This sounded bizarre, exaggerated. Once we all aired our concerns to Jonathan, Colin readily agreed to take his shots for him, immediately pouring one and drinking it, to which Jonathan laughed and clapped his hands together. None of us were opposed to someone else taking Jonathan's shots for him, but none of us would have picked Colin.

"Why don't you switch back to beer?" Renee suggested. "I think you might regret drinking all that tomorrow."

Jonathan blew at the deck of cards again, knocking down the entire stack. "Let the man take his shot," he bellowed. He didn't even sound like Jonathan anymore, it's like he just completely let go of himself. After two more rounds of

this, Kaiser suddenly grabbed the shot in Colin’s hand.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Jonathan said.

“I think he’s drank enough,” Kaiser said.

“Knock it off, Kaiser!” Jonathan spat, pushing him back with both hands and splashing most of the shot onto the table and Kaiser. “Let him drink!”

Kaiser stared at Jonathan, his patience running thin. He drank the rest of the shot and handed the glass to Colin. “I think you need to stop playing.”

Jonathan slunk back down into his chair. “Don’t tell me what to do,” he mumbled out.

“Why not? You always tell me what to do.”

“Jesus Christ Kaiser! Will you just shut up!” There was a long moment of silence before Jonathan pulled his silver coke case out, completely unbothered by everyone else’s presence.

“Really?” said Kaiser.

“Yes, really,” replied Jonathan, sorting out and snorting up a line with the same note as before. “I can’t deal with you anymore without it.”

“Can’t deal with me without it? What am I to you!” smacking the silver case to the floor. Colin went to pour himself another shot, but Kaiser grabbed the bottle before he did. “I said that I think you’ve had enough.”

A few of the others started to leave the room, undoubtedly becoming anxious and uncomfortable with Jonathan and the rest of the Cufflinks.

“Come on, let’s go,” Renee whispered to me as Chippy and Erin started for the door.

I barely made it to the door myself before I heard a bottle break behind me, followed by a scuffle and more raised voices.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” I heard Colin burst out.

I turned around and saw him feebly hitting Kaiser with his loose hands, wailing and smacking against him like an angry child. Jonathan got up to address Kaiser but was

promptly shoved back down into his seat, to which he got up again.

“Kaiser, stop it! Just-”

Everyone went silent as Kaiser’s hair and body abruptly flung to one side, a hard muffled sound breaking through before he caught himself on the table. Out of nowhere, Colin not only managed to close his fist, but throw a punch across Kaiser’s left cheek. Kaiser ran his hand along his cheek and jaw. He looked up at Colin, eyes furious before he suddenly jumped up, hitting him in the face with his own much stronger blow. He sprung down upon Colin, but as he did, Jonathan leapt from his chair and grabbed him from behind, struggling to pull him off. Chippy and I ran and drug Colin back, flailing and kicking while Matt helped Jonathan with Kaiser. Once they removed him though, he turned and began beating down on Jonathan, hitting him again and again, only stopping when he pulled himself away.

“You fucking piece of shit!” Kaiser spat. “You’re both fucking drunk out of your minds, and acting like fucking assholes! And you sit there while I just try to slow you two down and you take his fucking side! His side! You barely

fucking know him compared to me," he said, waiting for a response. The only response that came from Jonathan though, was a slight glare and a snarl before he turned over and his face relaxed again. "Fuck you Jonathan. Fuck you," he said before storming off upstairs.

Chippy helped Colin get back to his feet, but Colin just brushed him off, saying, "Get your hands off of me, I'm fucking fine!" before he too stormed off.

Colin took a strong punch from Kaiser to the face, but Jonathan had taken several, and not just on his face, but on his body and arms as well. Blood leaked from his nose and lip as welts and bruises quickly formed around his eyes, shrouded behind his now loose and messy hair.

"You okay?" I asked as I bent down beside him.

"I think so," he said, slowly starting to sit up. "Do you think you could pick up my coke over there?" pointing to the powder and the silver case strewn across the floor.

"I don't think you need any more of that right now," I said.

"No, can you just pick it up for me? I'd appreciate it," he said before pulling out a pack of cigarettes, lighting one up

as I went over to pick up his things. By now it was only me and him left in the room, Renee and the rest left shortly after Colin. “I probably won’t remember but, heh, I mean, I hardly remember now, but, tell me, truthfully, did I really act like an asshole? Even a little?”

I stopped and thought about it for a moment before I went back to sweeping up the white powder. And the more I thought about it, the more I kept coming back to the same answer. “Yes,” I said.

He gave a light utterance of a laugh. “And I don’t suppose you see any way of mending things, do you? Not in the near future anyway?”

“No.” I said, handing him his silver case.

“Me neither,” he said, tucking the case into his coat pocket before he lifted himself up onto the couch and laid down. “Good night Marcus,” he said before I turned off the light and left.

“Good night,” I said.

I wobbled up the staircase, finding I drank more than I realized as I ascended from the basement to the first floor,

the second, and finally my room on the third. It was dark, but I could see Colin sitting on his bed, his white shirt illuminated by what little light drifted in through the window.

“You okay?” I asked, stepping forward as I closed the door behind me.

“Yeah,” he said, sniffing his nose. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

I took off my shoes and socks and dressed into some pajamas, but as I walked over to my bed, Colin’s hand reached out from the dark and grabbed my arm. “What is it?” I said, startled. “You sure you’re okay?”

He sat there silently for a moment, keeping me from moving before he finally let go. “Nothing,” he said, but when I sat down he asked, “Do you think you can stay up with me for a bit tonight?” A moment of silence lingered as snowflakes pressed against the glass like tiny faces watching us before he continued, “You don’t have to. I’m sure you’re tired, I just… I don’t know. I just feel terrible about everything. I don’t know why I do stupid shit like this, to be honest. Sometimes I… I don’t know.” he turned and looked out the window, taking in a deep breath of air

before he pulled out a small flask tucked under his pillow, identical to the one he gave me. He took a long gulp from it before he sealed it shut. “My father,” he started before he paused again. “My father used to do things to my mother and me. He used to act like that, like how I did, only he was much stronger than I am, and he’d get much worse. One time, he hurt my mother so badly that she was in the hospital for days. We left him shortly after that.” He took another swig from the flask. “We traveled around the country for a long time, to her parents and relatives and such till we settled down in Washington. He would do things to me too sometimes, but not like my mother. He used to tell me that I was just like him, and that I’d end up just like him. And now, I don’t know, I think… I think he may be right.”

“Don’t say that,” I said, but he turned and looked back out the window.

“Doesn’t make it any less true.” He turned back around, looked at me, and handed me his flask. “Can you take this?” he said. “I don’t think I need anymore of it tonight.”

I took the flask and placed it in the desk drawer next to mine. He got up and walked to the bathroom, silently shutting the door behind him as he left and I fell asleep.

I awoke to the sound of dogs barking outside. Colin already left, and when I looked out the window, I saw multiple cop cars parked out front, several of which were labeled as K-9 units. I withdrew from the window and walked about the house until I found Renee in the mezzanine hallway, standing next to the door of her room while Sarah studied a book further down the hall, uncaring about everything and everyone else around her. I gave Renee a small kiss and embraced her, but she was either uncomfortable or uneasy in reciprocating any affection as she tugged herself away. Our conversion was also a dull and lifeless one, short and seemingly unbothered by anything besides the usual ‘hellos’ and ‘how are yous’ of brief acquaintances and family familiars. It was as if it pained her to talk to me or to open up at all, like she suddenly became reserved and impartial to my company, treating me like a stranger. So I

soon left, assuring her that I'd see her later, but she did not assure me of the same.

I found Chippy and Erin down in the kitchen, making some pop tarts and instant oatmeal they packed with them from the dining halls. They told me that Kaiser and Matt went out with the cops to help with the search, mostly due to the fact that everyone else either didn't want to or couldn't even if they did, those being Jonathan and Colin. Remus and Lady barked out the screen door ceaselessly, pacing around the mudroom and kitchen, their little nails tapping against the floor as they begged us to let them out, but none of us did.

"It's negative twelve degrees out," Erin read off her phone. "And that's not even the lowest it'll get. It's forecasting another snowstorm too, tonight and all day tomorrow and the low will be negative thirty five!"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Chippy said before biting down into a blueberry pop tart. "Mmm, well, you can bet that I'm not going outside anytime soon," taking a long sip of coffee. "No sir, as long as it's in the negatives, I'm staying indoors."

Erin turned off her phone and shoved it into her pocket before she got up and took her breakfast to the living room, most likely to continue painting. I stayed and chatted with Chippy for a bit before I left. From the mudroom window I could see four officers walking along the treeline with Kaiser, chatting as they poked and prodded through snow drifts and led a single German shepherd. Other officers could be seen through the cracks in the forest growth, just hidden behind the gnarled trees, yet still recognizable from where I stood. It was as if they knew Sjur lay within those woods, but they were more apprehensive in surrendering themselves to its will than Sjur himself was. I grabbed my coat along with the scarf Colin gifted me before I went out to see how the search was getting along.

The oppressive cold came to roost, and it was apparent it had no intention of leaving anytime soon. As soon as I stepped outside, the warmth of my entire body began to seep and drain away, sucked out of every inch that wasn’t shielded by my thick overcoat. The treeline lingered off in the distance, ready to swallow those who stood there talking at its foot. I trudged over to them as snow clung around my feet and legs, pulling any warmth that remained and replacing it with a sickly wet cold.

“And you weren’t out here when he went missing?” one officer asked Kaiser.

“No, no, I wasn’t,” Kaiser said, sounding like he answered that question countless times before. “And neither was Matt.”

I was troubled to find neither officer Norton nor officer Keel with them, but instead four strangers. Their dog, one that appeared much larger now than it did from the window, barked maddeningly at me as I approached them.

“Hello officers,” I said before I turned to Kaiser. “Where’s Matt?”

“In the forest with the other officers,” he said as several more dogs barked beyond the trees. “Why?”

“No reason,” I said. “Have you been able to find anything yet?” I said, already losing control of my body as it shook violently from the cold; I wondered how Kaiser and the rest of them were able to keep as warm and composed as they appeared.

“Son,” one of them started, an old gruff officer whose name I forget. “Frankly, it could be days or weeks until we find

him. Dogs haven’t caught a scent, and with this snow and the storm blowin’ in, there ain’t no tellin’ where or when he’ll turn up. We’ll keep searchin, you can count on that, but there ain’t much to go on. This property and them woods are a lot for a county such as ours to cover, and going off the story your friends told us, he may not even be on the property. We can get the state in here and they’ll be able to do more than we can, but with the weather up here like it is, that may be a few days, if not longer. But don’t you worry son, we’ll find your friend.”

I appreciated his confidence in that fact, but it did little in the way of comfort when paired with his previous statements.

“This state hasn’t seen a winter this bad in years. And with the storm blowing in tonight, it’s only bound to get worse. I’d recommend you all stay indoors and keep warm. This shit right now is only the tip of the iceberg. I’ve only seen a few of them like this, and they all have their own stories. Don’t be stupid, stay indoors, I can’t stress that enough. Ain’t none of you kids seen anything like what’s heading this way, and it ain’t stopping for no thing or no one,” he

said, stepping back a bit to calm the dog who continued to bark at me. “Looks like you best head back inside.”

I turned and walked back to the house, the cold rearing up and pushing me like a crowd shoving their way to the scene of a crime, eager to see the destruction and horror ahead. I stumbled inside, kicking the snow and slush from my boots as my body ached from the warmth it now received. I passed the dogs, and they followed me, begging to be let out, to which I paid them no mind. I wandered into the parlor, finding Jonathan there, resting in a chair, next to which Lady soon joined him.

“Have they found anything?” he rolled out.

“No,” I said. “Not yet, at least.” I sat down in a chair next to him. No fire glowed in the room, the only light being a lamp that resided in the corner just illuminating his figure; his strong jawline and well-defined features only a silhouette of his current disfigurement. “A storm is going to blow in tonight,” I said. “It looks like it’s going to be a bad one.”

He sat silent before he shifted upright. “I don’t remember anything about last night,” He said. “But I don’t think I

need to remember. I think I've figured it out for myself. I'm fairly certain I know who gave me these," turning to show me the bruises and welts that grew across his face.

"Do you need anything, maybe some ice?" I suggested.

He turned back over. "No," he said. "I don't think we need any more ice around here."

"Alright. Well, can I get you anything?"

"Some whiskey," he said. "I could go for a glass of whiskey right now."

"Alright," I said, getting up from my chair to fetch him a glass.

"Oh," he said, cutting me off before I left the room. "Water it down. I don't think straight whiskey would be a wise decision."

I soon returned with the glass, just like he asked for it. "Here," I said. "Might help with… those. The pain, that is."

"Thanks," he said, taking a tiny sip before he rested the glass on his knee.

After a moment, I asked him if he knew where Colin was, to which he told me he saw him in the study. “The study?” I said, not knowing of this room’s existence.

“Yeah, it’s on the second floor,” He said. “You haven’t seen it?”

“No,” I said.

I departed at once, off to the foyer and up the staircase where I passed Sarah, still reading her book. The study was the second room to the end of the hall and was easy to miss as the door blended seamlessly with the woodwork and didn’t appear to be more than a closet. When I opened it up though, I found a small room with a desk and rocking chair, in which sat Colin, sucking from a bottle of wine like a man starved of thirst in the desert. A stuffed bird, a hawk I think it was, stood on the desk spreading its wings over the wine glass Colin abandoned. He sat slumped over in his chair, the collar of his shirt a mess and a tie draped loosely, barely hanging to his thin neck that held his head at an acute angle. At first I didn’t want to enter, and I even thought about turning away until he said, “Marcus, good to see you.”

“Hey, been studying, have you?” I joked, looking over the books stacked precariously on the many shelves around the room.

“Just been thinking, actually.”

“About what?” I asked, taking the seat at the desk.

“Nothing important,” he said, setting the bottle on the floor. He sat there for a moment, consumed by thought as he stroked his chin with a single index finger. He grabbed the glass he abandoned, still about half full, and took a long sip before he set it back down and started, “Now I’ve been thinking over this for a minute, over what that one cop said the other day.”

“What?” I said, turning my chair around and sitting elbows over the back.

“Why are there ten of us here?” He took another sip before he topped off his glass with the rest of the bottle. “And… the whole Sarah situation is weird. Why did she show up right after Sjur disappeared?” I quickly got up and closed the door before he continued. “You know, when I saw Chippy and Erin’s letters the day they came here, I saw

that they had the numbers 10 and 11 on them. Mine's labeled 4."

"Mine's 8, I believe," I said. "And I've been wondering about that myself, ever since the day I got here, actually. When Jonathan said that there would be six of us, Chippy and Erin hadn't arrived yet, but I knew they were coming. I wondered even then why there were so many of us. I forget, have you ever done this before?"

"No," he replied. "Only Jonathan has, as far as I know. And he's only done it one other time, over the summer."

"He did say there were six last time, and if that was the summer, then that might make some sense at least."

"Why's that?" he asked.

"Well, I think there are more things that can go wrong in winter than summer, and so more work to be done."

"It's not like we're really working though." He laughed. "And I can't think of anything that could go wrong that would require more than say four or five people. It just simply doesn't make good sense. Call me crazy, but Dean

Hall has to either be stupid or… have something else planned.”

I thought for a second, there were so many things that just didn’t add up, but I couldn’t possibly see Dean Hall or anyone for that matter planning something like this, and my optimism took over, why think ill of someone who has only shown you kindness. “Maybe he’s only trying to help some people pay their way through college.” I said.

Colin laughed again. “Maybe, but I haven’t met anyone so charitable, passing out two thousand dollars to eleven separate students who don’t give a shit about you.”

“Well, there’s always a first,” I said, and he laughed again. I laughed too, but even if this was the answer, something nagged at me in the back of my brain. It still just didn’t seem to make sense. “But what about Kaiser?” I said.

“Huh?”

“Well, him and Jonathan were, are best friends, right?”

“So?”

“So, why didn’t he come along with Jonathan the first time?” We sat silently for a few long seconds before I finally said, “What if he did?”

“What! no?” He reared back, looking at me with bewildered eyes.

“Why not?” I said. “What if something bad happened, something like last night, or like with Sjur, and they are just trying to forget about it and start anew?”

Colin rolled in his rocking chair. “I think we would have figured that out by now.”

“Probably. I don’t think that they did, but they could have.”

Colin leaned back again, thinking long and hard before he returned to his original ponderings, asking, “Why didn’t Dean Hall just tell us how many would be here?”

At half-past five, Kaiser and Matt wandered back into the house. By this time, the dark storm clouds that were once

off in the distance rolled over the house, casting long shadows that twisted the landscape around us, giving everything a gangly look. The cops drove off in their vans and the dogs barked and hollered, longing to chase after them.

Kaiser brushed past Colin and I as a few of the others set the table. “Don’t bother setting my seat,” he grunted. Dark circles formed below his eyes and his cheeks were flushed and blistered a bright red. His hand shook erratically as it searched for the railing that led upstairs. He lumbered up them, his hair a disheveled mess, a broken crown of gold that sat upon his head, teetering and straining under its heavy weight.

Jonathan emerged from the living room, stumbling out into the foyer with his glass of watered whiskey. “Kaiser?” he said in a shallow, meek tone.

“Shut up,” Kaiser fired back, continuing his slow march up the stairs. “Just let me be.”

Matt slung off his boots in the mudroom. “They didn’t find anything,” he rolled out. “And they don’t think they’ll be back tomorrow. The storm is getting too violent. Mark?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You think that you and Colin or Chippy can go get some firewood from the shed?”

“Why couldn’t you and Kaiser?” I said without thinking.

“Look, can you just get some firewood man! Me and Kaiser have been freezing our asses off for like four hours!”

“Yeah,” I murmured. “Yeah, I can do that.”

It was like everything was bathed in the thin, cloudy veneer of a dream. Everything seemed different. People talked differently, people acted differently, and they looked altered, but you weren’t able to put a finger on what had changed. Was it their faces? Their voices maybe? Maybe it was the wounds on Jonathan’s face that painted him in a different light. Maybe the dark rings under Kaiser’s tired eyes. Might it have been the way Renee now spoke to me without any care, without any attention or acknowledgement of my presence? Maybe, but I think it was something else, something that hid under the surface of everything.

I soon found Chippy sitting alone in the dining room, smoking a joint. “Hey,” I said. “Do you think you could help me bring some firewood inside?”

“No thanks man!” he said, still staring at his joint. “It’s fuckin cold out there. Ask Colin or Jonathan.”

I didn’t ask either of them as I thought both needed to rest, and so I went out alone. The wind slapped me in the face, scratching and biting at my skin with a dry and bitter breath. In my haste I forgot my overcoat, and the door to the house quickly snapped shut behind me. ‘I should make this quick,’ I thought.

I waded forward through the deep waves of snow, leaching and sapping any memory of warmth from my body. I don’t know why I always thought like this, but the idea of freezing to death always felt like a long, drawn-out process to me. It never occurred to me just how quickly one could get so absolutely and terribly cold. By the time I made it to the shed, my fingers were so numb that they couldn’t wrap around the handle of the door, the door that almost supernaturally wished to remain shut. But the idea of returning empty-handed and cold was a stupidly pitiful one to me, and I wrapped my hand around the handle,

interlocking the fingers with my other hand before I pulled with both arms aching until finally the shed opened up before me.

A black pit was all I could see as the wind blew and echoed inside, whistling through the cracks in its walls. I stepped forward once my eyes adjusted. Inside lay some split wood with more full logs towards the back, along with an old logging saw, far too large for any single person to use alone. As I knelt down to pick up some of the logs though, I heard a long creaking sound behind me, and I remembered what Kaiser had told me about the door. I turned around and shoved my hand between the door and the frame just in time for it to slam my palm between them. It hurt, but not much, and this surprised me until I realized just how cold I was. The main feeling wasn't pain, but a brief resurgence of warmth in my hand. Using both my hands like stubs, I wedged a log into the door before I piled up about six or so more into my arms and stood up. As I did though, I felt my right knee struggle and quiver before it suddenly gave out, sending me into the wall of the shed, knocking a couple pieces from my arms.

“It’s negative twelve degrees out, and that’s not even the lowest it’ll get. It’s forecasting another snowstorm too, tonight and all day tomorrow and the low will be negative thirty five!”

I propped myself up, Erin’s words echoing in my head as I processed the gravity of the situation I was now in. I couldn’t feel my feet, or my ankles for that matter, and my hands were now nothing more than nubs, as I could hardly sense anything below my elbows. I slowly got back up to my feet, everything aching terribly like I just worked every muscle well beyond their limit. Frost and cold slithered in through the crack in the door, whispering thoughts to me: you’re fine, just take a rest and you’ll be fine in a few minutes, just get some rest first. I entertained them for a moment, after all, maybe I did just need to catch my breath, but I suddenly asked myself why did I need to rest at all? It was the cold, the cold drained all my energy from me, and resting wasn’t going to help that. I struggled and eventually opened the door. I didn’t want to leave, but I knew I had to.

I slowly made my way back to the house, stumbling and falling several times into the deep snow. By the time I

managed to reach the door, I only had two or three logs left in my arms, undoubtedly soaked and covered in snow. I was so focused on making it back that everything else didn't matter and just sort of faded out of focus.

I pushed open the screen door, and it started flapping wildly in the breeze, beating itself against the frame as I collapsed into the nearest chair, the sound of it straining underneath my dead weight splitting in my ears. My hands trembled and fidgeted, stinging with a sharp static pain as my eyes welled up uncontrollably, streams running down my face and onto my shirt. I became at once aware of a sour, rancid smell in the room, but I couldn't yet process what it was. No one was there, but someone noticed the door had been left open, and I could hear footsteps rushing to the kitchen.

Colin ran into the room, quickly shutting the flapping door before his eyes darted to the logs, scattered and dripping on the floor, and then to me, slumped over in the chair. "Shit man, are you okay?"

"Yeah," I mumbled. "No, I don't know." I grasped the edge of the table and tried to get to my feet, but when it became apparent to me that my body was still aching too much to

move, I played it off as me adjusting myself. “Do you think you could get me something to drink?” I asked.

“Like what?” he said.

“Whiskey.”

He laughed before he got up and grabbed a bottle. “Well, you better enjoy it,” he said. “Cause there’s only one bottle after this one.”

“What about brandy?” I said.

“Looks like about half a bottle of that St-Remy stuff and some 84. We’re running low on all fronts. Wine, vodka, whisky, all pretty low or gone, and don’t even bother asking how much beer we got left after last night,” he said, handing me the glass I requested.

I took a sip, feeling it sit in my mouth before it slipped down my throat and into my gut, where it sat burning like hot acid. My fingers began to remember the warmth they’d been neglected, twitching and fumbling around the rim of the glass. I breathed in deeply, and that rancid smell hit my nostrils again, and I recognized what it was. It was vomit. “Where’s Matt?” I asked before I took another sip.

“What?” Colin said, perplexed. “I thought you were here for that? He ran over to the sink shortly after he came in and threw up. He isn’t feeling good, and I think he may have a fever.”

“Shit,” I said, starting to get up before my body pulled me back down. “Where is he then?”

“He’s upstairs taking a bath,” He said, turning to me with a glass of water in his hand. “Speaking of which, you don’t look too good yourself right now. How long were you out there?”

“I don’t know, five, ten minutes maybe.”

“Well, it’s damn near negative twenty out. We best get you warmed up, here give me your hand,” outstretching his own good one. I took it and he quickly lifted me to my feet, causing me to spill some of my drink. “Hold on to that!” He laughed. “Come on, let’s get you next to the fireplace.”

He walked me over and sat me down in the same chair he had when I first arrived. Lady lifted her head to look at me, but promptly laid back down next to Jonathan, mindlessly swirling a glass of ice as he stared into the fire.

“Here, let me grab those logs you brought in,” Colin said. “We can dry them off next to the fire.”

I hadn’t noticed it when he helped me over, but his leg must have still been hurting him, as he limped out of the room with a sort of rigid shuffle. He returned a few moments later and set the logs down in front of the fire before he took a seat next to me. We sat there with Jonathan for a while as I warmed up, but none of us spoke. Colin started smoking one cigarette, then another, until his pack was empty and he moved on to his vape. Jonathan started smoking his pipe, but after a few minutes, he set it down and went back to his whiskey. I took out a wintergreen Rogue and placed it in my mouth before leaning back into my chair and resting my eyes. Part of me wanted to see the others and how Matt was doing, but the other part of me was still frozen outside, waiting to thaw out, rest and recover, and it was that part of me I listened to.

We sat there for some time, just watching the flickering flames and feeding them when they died down. After a while though, Jonathan retired upstairs for the night, slowly making his way up the creaking stairs with Lady

close behind him. Colin stayed for a little longer, but soon he became talkative and I myself wasn't. So I suggested we watch a movie in the living room, to which he suggested Whiplash, and I reluctantly agreed.

The film was actually great, but my mind wandered constantly throughout it. More than once I glanced over at Erin's painting before feeling a shiver crawl up my back, forcing me to turn back to the film. At one point about halfway through, Chippy joined us and passed around a spliff.

"What's going on?" he asked after blowing a large cloud of smoke in front of the screen.

"He just got in a car accident cause he's rushing to play at a concert," Colin said impatiently. "Just watch the movie."

"Well, why didn't he just call and say that he was going to be late?"

"Cause he was already there, and the teacher's a prick, and… just watch it!"

There was a long pause as I hit the skunky spliff and passed it back to Chippy. He hit it again for a moment, letting out

and inhaling a small ghost of smoke before a thin wispy stream flew out between his lips. “Do you have much weed left?” he asked before handing it to Colin.

“Just watch the damn movie,” Colin snapped as he took the spliff. He hit it and let out a small sigh. “No, no, I don’t,” he said.

I awoke to find Erin busy at work with her painting. The morning sun hadn’t managed to pierce through the thick blanket of clouds overhead, and thus cast everything in a dreary, bleak gray. Wafts of snow bellowed past the windows, causing them to rattle with the sounds of fat, buzzing flies.

I got up and walked to the bathroom, Whiplash’s Caravan replaying over and over in my head as I brushed my teeth, shaved, and washed my face. When I got out of the bathroom, I found myself face to face with Renee. She wasn’t there to greet me or tell me good morning though, as when I greeted her, she mumbled her own reply back to

me before she pushed past and into the bathroom, promptly shutting the door behind her. I waited there for a second to see if she'd say anything through the door to me, or me to her, but neither of us did, and I soon left.

I found Colin, Matt, Chippy, Erin, and June hanging in and around the kitchen. Colin cooked a few eggs while Chippy buttered some toast for Matt. Erin wandered around, filling the dogs' dishes with water and food while June sat at the table with Matt across from her, slumped over in his chair and making the most horrible groaning sounds. He looked terrible, an unkept mess of bed hair and loose nightwear draped around his skin that grew to a sickly pale pink.

"No thanks," he croaked out, shoving the toast to the other side of the table.

"Come on, you gotta eat something," Chippy said as he picked up one of the pieces and ate it.

June also picked up a piece. "If you don't eat something, you're only going to feel worse," she said, taking a bite.

"No," he said more insistently. "I'll just throw it back up." He rolled back in his chair and groaned loudly. "Ugh, and those eggs are making me feel nauseous," he said. "I'm

going to lie down in the living room." He got up and shuffled his way out of the room like an old man, while June followed close behind.

Colin poured out cups of coffee for the rest of us, stirring a generous spoonful of butter into his own mug as he asked us if we wanted any in our own.

"What?" Chippy said. "Butter in coffee?"

"Sure," Erin replied in a chipper tone. "I've never tried it before."

Colin handed her the cup he prepared for himself before he started making a second. After a moment, Chippy quietly asked for a sip from Erin's mug, to which he kept drinking from it until he got his own.

"It isn't great," Chippy said. "But it's better than nothing." He sat there for a few minutes with the rest of us, silently sipping at our coffees, until he finally sat up. "So, what the hell is up with that new girl?"

"Sarah?" Colin said. "Who knows. She doesn't talk to anyone."

“Yeah, I mean I didn’t even remember her name until you just now said it,” Chippy replied.

“She just sits upstairs and reads all day,” June chimed in, walking in and over to the sink to fetch a glass of water.

“Yeah, and there’s nothing wrong with that, but when that’s all she does…” Erin said, leaning over and grabbing a piece of toast. “She’s never once said hello or good morning or… anything to me. She’s so reclusive,” crunching down into the piece of buttered toast. “Does she even go to UJR?”

“I don’t know,” Colin said, sitting down next to us with his coffee. “The rest of us do, so you think she would.”

Kaiser stormed into the room, his long overcoat swooping up behind him and falling back down, when he stopped to grab a cup of coffee.

“Where the hell are you going?” Colin scoffed with a chuckle. “It’s damn near negative twenty out.”

“Exactly,” He said before gulping down a mug of black coffee. “And we have next to no wood left in the house. So Marcus, Chippy, come on, let’s get going.”

“What!” Chippy said agasp. “I’m not fuckin going out there if that’s what you think!”

“Umm, actually, yes, you are,” Kaiser said back. “We need to go get wood, and everyone else isn’t up to it right now.”

“Well hey, I didn’t say that I wasn’t up for it,” Erin said. “Chippy and I can be out in five minutes.” She got up and quickly drug Chippy out of the room, him pleading and mumbling behind her.

Kaiser turned around and refilled his mug, taking another deep gulp of steaming black coffee just seconds after he poured it. He looked at Colin before taking another sip. “Sorry,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Sorry, for hitting you in the face,” He mumbled out before he turned back around.

If anything, Colin almost seemed aggravated by this, quickly getting up from his chair and leaving without saying a word.

Kaiser stood there for a moment and began looking through some cabinets. “Do we have any whiskey left?” He said after a minute.

“Yeah, but there isn’t much,” I said, pointing to the top of the fridge where the bottle stood. “There’s a bit of brandy left too, but that’s about used up as well.”

Kaiser grabbed the bottle of whiskey and yanked the cork out, pouring a liberal amount of it into his coffee before he sealed it shut and placed it back where he found it. Not a minute later did Erin and Chippy reemerge, fully bundled up and ready to go out into the cold.

“Let me just grab my coat,” I said.

We went outside and shuffled through the snow and heavy winds towards the woodshed. Chippy made a quick passing comment about how he was going to grab his grinder and any weed that remained inside from his car on the way back before Kaiser cut him off.

“I don’t know about you,” he said, his hair constantly shifting in the breeze. “But I don’t want to be out here all day, so let’s make this quick.”

The cold seeped through everything, tearing the heat from my veins and draining the warmth from my very bones before it dissipated into the dead winter air. I ensured a steady supply of wood that Kaiser chopped and Chippy wheeled away in a wheelbarrow once Erin loaded it for him. It surprised me just how long Kaiser could keep it up. Every piece of wood I brought him he'd have chopped into pieces before I brought him the next; each swing of the axe sending tens of splinters into the air until eventually the surrounding snow was completely covered.

"Son of a bitch!" he shouted as he tried chopping a gnarled log. He lifted the axe above his head, its blade still buried in the log as he began smashing it against the frozen ground again and again. The wood squeaked and cracked with each successive blow until it finally burst apart, leaving Kaiser panting for a second before he picked the axe back up and began splitting the next. I don't know how I hadn't realized how strong he was before, but seeing him smash that stump into the ground over and over again, each time heaving it above his head only for it come crashing back down into the ground, I could see he was much stronger than I gave him credit for, and I could see

how he could so easily overpower and pummel a drunken Jonathan.

After about five wheelbarrows full of lumber, we went back to the house. I thought I felt numb before, but when the warm air of the house hit me, everything just sort of melted away and felt strangely puffy, that being the only sensation I could call it. It was like my body had to remember slowly but surely that, yes, these are my fingers, and these are my hands, and my ears. And once they did remember that they were mine, they remembered that they had just been out freezing in negative twenty degree weather with a bitter wind, and that they did in fact freeze.

Chippy already brought most of the wood into the parlor, and what was left only took a few minutes for us to bring in. After that, my whole body felt stiff and rigid, and all I felt like doing was lying down. My head ached, my body ached, everything ached, and I just wanted to be left alone now. But before I could leave the parlor, Jonathan stopped me. The others had already left, and I just wanted to get to my bed.

“What is it?” I said in a rather annoyed tone.

“How is he doing? Kaiser,” barely lifting his head to look at me while his left hand held a glass of amber liquid, most likely the last of the whiskey.

“I don’t know. Ask him yourself,” I grunted before I stormed out of the room. I didn’t mean to act like an asshole, and in fact I didn’t even realize it until later, but either way I did.

Kaiser sat on the floor in the upstairs hallway, just staring blankly at Sarah reading across the hall or at the wall behind her, I couldn’t tell which. I almost stopped to say something to him, but he didn’t look particularly talkable and I just wanted to go lie down. When I got to my room though, I found Colin playing his bass, nothing in particular, just sort of mindlessly plucking strings. He didn’t stop playing, in fact, he didn’t even bother to look up at all. When it became apparent he wasn’t going to stop, I grabbed a random book from my desk and acted like that’s what I came for before I went back downstairs.

I found the living room preoccupied as well. Chippy was there playing something on his phone while Erin watched something on her own, apparently, “looking for inspiration.”

So I slumped down the steps to the game room, where I plugged my phone into the stereo and played some soothing jazz music on low, and soon fell asleep.

I awoke to the sound of raised voices coming from upstairs. I looked over and picked up my phone. The music stopped, no signal, and it was nearly eight o'clock at night. I went upstairs to find Erin and Chippy arguing with Jonathan; Kaiser was there too.

"He's not doing well at all, he hasn't ate a thing!" Erin pleaded.

"You're not going anywhere," Jonathan said, leaning on the staircase railing for support. "At this time of the night and during this storm, you won't make it to Leon, much less Hunting,"

"We're taking his truck!" Chippy said. "Thing's a beast. And besides, his fever's gone up and he can hardly move! He needs to get to a hospital."

"He's as pale as a ghost now," Kaiser added. "But we shouldn't go out tonight. If he's not better by the morning, then we can go, but this storm is too bad right now."

Chippy didn’t seem to care, and neither did Erin, and as they both went to leave I quickly interjected, “No, Chippy don’t,” I said. “Are you crazy?”

He opened the door with a burst of icy wind flooding the room, and for a moment he hesitated, but soon he went out with Erin close behind him. Snow and darkness was all to be seen.

“Chippy!” I called. “Get your ass back inside!”

He turned back around and looked at me, and I could see in his eyes that he made up his mind; that was until we were all suddenly plunged into a complete pitch dark. All I heard was a slight buzz before the power went out, and we were all thrown into a haze of confusion and panic. It’s strange, it’s like we all forgot where we were, like we were thrust into some new strange and alien place.

“What just happened!” I heard someone shout.

“Shit! The power just went out!” Colin said, running through the upstairs hallway before he loudly bumped into something.

I looked around and could see absolutely nothing, nothing to even hint where I stood. But the wind was to my back, telling me that the door was right there, I just couldn't see it. "Chippy! Get your ass back inside!" I repeated.

"Marcus!" I heard Kaiser say. "Marcus, close that door! You're letting all the warm air out!"

"Marcus!" Chippy called from somewhere outside. "Where's the door? I can't see shit!"

I heard someone's footsteps walk right up to me, heavy and rapid, before a white light burst in the foyer. I saw Jonathan standing next to the railing, his eyes wide and lost as Kaiser stood next to me, facing outwards. I turned around and saw Chippy and Erin slowly making their way back to the house like a couple of blind mice.

"Chippy!" Kaiser called, wielding his phone as a flashlight. "Chippy, get inside!"

I felt stupid for not thinking of that sooner and felt around in my pocket, pulling out my own and likewise turning it on. "Chippy! Erin!" I said. "Chippy, come on!"

He stumbled in, kicking snow from his boots, while Erin slammed the door shut.

“Shit man, what happened?” He said.

“We lost power,” Kaiser sharply replied. “What’s it look like?”

“Well, shouldn’t we start the generator?”

“No,” Jonathan said. “We’ll be fine if we get into the parlor and keep the fire going. That storm is terrible and we can easily get lost in it right now. We keep the fire burning and get the generator going in the morning, but for now, we have to stay together.”

None of us really liked the idea, but it was hard to argue against it. I myself heard tales of people getting lost a mere 30 feet from their house during blizzards like this, and I don’t think any of us felt like repeating those stories. Chippy, Erin, and I gathered everyone in the parlor, the only objector being Sarah, who remained adamant in saying she’d be fine in her room until Kaiser went up and nearly dragged her downstairs. The fire produced enough heat, that wasn’t the problem, the problem was keeping the heat in the room, and the only solution we could think of

was nailing blankets to the entranceways. It worked well in keeping most of the heat in, but whenever anyone left, a noticeable draft swept through the room and sucked all the heat out with it; and it didn't help that one blanket had a particularly hard time staying up, often falling down with the slightest breeze or touch upon its surface. The thought of how bleak our situation was often crossed my mind as I nailed up the blankets, stoked the fire, and just looked around at everyone else huddled up in that room. I always managed to push it back though and somehow convince myself that nothing was wrong as I stared into the fire, one of the dogs letting out a light hum against its crackling embers.

Renee was there too, and she stayed close to me, but not as close as before. At one point I felt like asking her about what happened between us, but when I went to she adjusted herself, and I could see a smile just twinkle on her face for a brief moment before it vanished, and I decided to go to bed myself.

I awoke early in the morning to the sight of my breath hanging far out in front of me. I sat up and found everyone still asleep, everyone that was except Kaiser. He stood

upright, leaning against the mantle as he fed logs into the fire.

“Morning,” I mumbled as he threw another log on, summoning a small cloud of embers and soot.

“Morning,” he mumbled back. “We’ve already used more than half of what we brought in yesterday, the wood, that is.”

I looked around and could see everyone else still fast asleep. Jonathan sat upright in his chair, his head hanging over to one side while Lady rested her head on his foot. Chippy and Erin were huddled up in one corner while June and Matt were in another, he still looked terrible.

“How’s he doing?” I asked.

Kaiser turned over and looked at him. “He woke up a few times last night, but he didn’t throw up or anything.”

I looked at Kaiser for a moment. His eyes had heavy dark rings below them, and his hands fidgeted and played with themselves erratically. “Did you sleep?” I asked.

He looked back at the fire. “No, not really,” he said. “Someone had to keep the fire going.”

“You doing okay?”

“No,” he bluntly stated before he chuckled. “No, I’m fine.”

“You sure?” I said, slowly getting up and walking over to him. “Cause you seem pretty out of it.”

“Yeah, no, it’s just Jonathan. You know how he is. He can be a real prick sometimes.” He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one up. “He means well most the time, but he can be a real asshole and he doesn’t have room for anyone else’s ideas. He’s always got to be the leader… Did you read any Nietzsche yet?”

“Yeah, some,” I said, though really I did no more than listen to part of a video on him.

“Thou shall, that’s what he is. At every turn, he’s there to boss me around, tell me what to do, what to say, how to act, yet it’s never crossed his mind that I will and can think for myself.”

“Yeah, I get that,” I said.

“No, no, you don’t,” he said coldly, chucking the cigarette into the fire before he abruptly left, letting the blanket fall

to the floor behind him. A dead chill swiftly ran through the room, picking up and stealing all the warmth from the air.

‘You know, you can be a real asshole too,’ I thought to myself before I got up and pinned the blanket back around the entrance.

Chippy sat up, stretched, and groaned. “Mmmm- oh fuck, it’s cold!” he suddenly said, wrapping his blanket around himself tighter. “What time is it?”

“About seven,” I said, looking at my phone. “Still no signal, though.”

“That’s not surprising,” he said, getting up. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we don’t see signal again till we get out of here.” he walked over and sat down next to the fire. “Is he feeling any better yet?” he said, motioning to Matt.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t seem it,” I said, looking over to him still asleep, huddled up and gripping his blanket with white-knuckled hands. “But I don’t think you guys should take him to the hospital yet. He’s only been sick for a day, and it could just be a cold mixed with a bad hangover or something.”

“What?” Chippy said. “I mean yeah, it could be, but that looks worse than any hangover I’ve had, and Matt’s a pretty tough guy.”

“I know, but let’s hope it’s just that for now.”

“What do you mean?” Chippy said, leaning in a little closer.

“I mean, there’s no reason not to believe it’s just a cold or something minor like that.” I stopped for a second, thinking over my words carefully. “I mean, there’s no reason to believe it’s anything serious, and even if it is, we don’t know what it is, and there’s not much we can do about it right now. And telling him we don’t know why he’s sick, or that we can’t help him might just make things worse, he might start to feel worse too. And if we tell him it’s something like a cold or a hangover, he might even start feeling better knowing that.”

“Are you saying we should lie to him?”

“Well no,” I said. “As I said, we don’t know what it is, and the only thing we can think it could be is a hangover or a bad cold.”

Chippy leaned back. “I don’t know if I like that,” he said. “What if it is something worse?”

“Well, it’s not like we can take him to the hospital right now,” I said. “There’s not much else we can do. And if he thinks it’s something minor, he may even start feeling better.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I still don’t like the idea of lying to him.”

“Well, do you have a better idea?”

“Yeah, take him to the hospital,” he quickly shot back.

“Chippy, we can’t!” I said. “Have you looked outside? You’re not from here, and I’m telling you right now that they haven’t plowed those roads, they’re not safe. It’s probably three feet deep or deeper in some areas. We wouldn’t even make it to Leon.” I leaned back and took a deep breath. “Look, I’m just saying that telling him we don’t know what’s going on is a bad idea. He could start freaking out or panicking, and that’s only going to make things worse.” The lights suddenly came back on with an electric buzz, stirring a few of the others from their sleep, including Matt.

“Okay,” Chippy said before he leaned forward and spoke in a whisper. “But if he starts feeling worse, we have to at least try and take him to the hospital.”

“For sure,” I said.

“Alright, well… shit man, I need to smoke now,” He said getting up. “You wanna join?”

“Sure,” I said.

We found that Kaiser had turned the generator on, and as Chippy and I lit up in the mudroom, he came stomping back in. The three of us stood there silently passing the joint between us until Colin came in while hitting his vape, breathing more from it than the air around him as he started making up a breakfast.

“Go easy on the power,” Kaiser said before he hit the joint. “Don’t want to overload the generator.”

“Kaiser, I’m not going to overload the fucking generator making breakfast!” Colin snapped.

“Alright, then don’t,” He said, handing Chippy the joint. “By the way, I’m not hungry,” exiting before Colin responded.

“Good,” Colin said under his breath. “Wasn’t making you any.”

Even though power now surged through the house, it remained bone chillingly cold for the next couple hours, and Chippy and I soon huddled around the stove next to Colin for warmth.

“Well, if you’re going to stand there, at least help me with breakfast,” he said.

I helped make some plain oatmeal, and Chippy toasted some bread while Colin stirred eggs in a pan. I was starting to get tired of the eggs and toast, I wasn’t the biggest fan of them to begin with, but there wasn’t much else we could make for breakfast. At one point, Jonathan came into the room and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“No creamer?” he asked.

“No,” Colin replied. “But there’s butter if you want to try that.”

“Whiskey?”

“Gone too.”

Jonathan sighed and poured his coffee before he slumped down into a chair at the table.

“Hey,” Colin said, turning to him as he stirred the pan. “I’ve been meaning to ask you since you kind of know Dean Hall. Why’s he have this place?”

“What do you mean?” Jonathan said, perking up as he pulled out his pipe.

“Well, most people come to Montana for winter activities, you know, skiing and things like that. So why would he move away during winter? Heh, I mean, why would he buy a place like this if he isn’t even here for winter?”

“I don’t know,” Jonathan said. “He’s old, probably got this place when he was younger, and now it’s just too much for him to manage by himself.”

“Doesn’t he have family?” Colin asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jonathan said, leaning back and lighting up his pipe. “He’s never mentioned any to me.”

This triggered a response in my brain, and their questions began repeating as I started making connections and noticing things I hadn’t before. There were no family

pictures throughout the house, or any pictures at all really, and although the bedrooms were furnished, they didn't contain any personal belongings or denote ownership of any kind. "Where's he now?" I asked.

"Texas, I think," Jonathan said. "I know he has a place down there, but I don't know if he's actually there or not. He didn't say where he was going."

We finished making up breakfast, and while we did, Chippy and I told them about our conversation that morning. Jonathan seemed to support it, however Colin was more hesitant. After a few minutes, he warmed up to it, but never quite liked the idea entirely.

I picked up a bowl of oats and a plate of eggs for Matt and June respectively and brought them over to them. "Hey man, how you doing?" I said as I handed him his bowl.

"Oh, no thanks. I don't want anything," he said, pushing the bowl away.

"Well, come on, you have to eat something," I said. "Especially after last night."

June’s ears seemed to perk up at this, and she looked at me with a short, confused look, but when he accepted the bowl, she went back to her plate of eggs. If she would have followed her suspicion and asked me something, anything, I don’t know how I would’ve responded.

After a few hours, the house started to warm up a bit, but the cold never fully went away, and in some rooms, no matter what you did, you were overcome by the constant aching feeling of your muscles slowly freezing. Frost crept over and covered all the windows of the house until you could hardly see anything past their cloudy white film. Seeing one’s breath not only became a regularity in the house, but became irregular not to see, following each of us around like our own individual rain-clouds. The dogs soon became reclusive, like the rest of us, Remus in particular was now only a shadow of his more energetic, hyper self. And soon I could feel something start to build up in me, though it had been growing over the past few days. This house and the things within that once amazed me and seemed the definition of comfort, I grew to hate as the more I wanted to leave, the more it forced me to stay within. And if there was one thing I knew, it’s that I wasn’t the first to start feeling that way towards that house.

I heard tales and watched specials on TV about Montana and its notorious winters. Stories of people getting lost in blizzards, stories of people slowly freezing to death in their house as they waited for a chinook that never came, or worse yet, the stories of people who succumbed to cabin fever. The worst part was most of these stories came from people who lived on the prairie, where a chinook could wipe away winter's wastes, even if it was only briefly. But we were in the mountains, where a chinook could not reach and the stories of what happened up there never made their way back down again.

The rest of the day it snowed, heavy white flakes that piled up fast. Soon it became difficult, if not near impossible, to open some of the doors that led outside. And the wind never stopped, a constant wailing that echoed throughout the house and kept you from feeling any semblance of comfort.

"Shit, doesn't Hall have a snowplow or something?" Chippy said, looking out the window at what used to be the driveway.

“There’s a four-wheeler with a plow in the garage,” Jonathan said. “But be my guest. I’m not going out there, not right now,” leaning back and taking a long sip of coffee.

“How are we going to get out of here?” Chippy said.

That night we all gathered in the dining room, reminiscent of our first few nights there only without any of the friendliness or conversations. Colin and I worked in the kitchen for a couple hours making a white sauce lasagna, though we ended up substituting many of the ingredients we didn’t have.

“I found a box of powdered milk in the pantry,” Colin said. “It doesn’t seem expired, so we’ll use that for the sauce,” stirring a pan of browning sausage. “I’ve always wanted to make lasagna bianca, but never really had the chance. Can you heat some water for peas and noodles?”

I started boiling up the water, and shortly after I poured in the peas, Chippy walked into the room. He immediately pulled Colin aside and started speaking to him urgently in the mudroom.

“Are you sure?” He said. “Not even a little?”

“No!” Colin whispered. “I already told you I don’t.”

“Not anything?” Chippy asked. “Cause I really think he could use some. I’d even pay you. You know how it’s considered a medicine in some places. It might help him.”

“... Fine,” Colin said. “But I only have a little left.”

“Great! Where’s it at?”

“No, I’ll go get it,” Colin said. “Just keep stirring that pan for me.”

“Yeah! No problem, man!” Chippy said as Colin quickly walked away without another word.

Renee had walked in while they were speaking and grabbed herself a glass of water before she turned to speak with me and Colin left. We only talked briefly about Matt’s current condition, but it was hard to hold a conversation with Chippy in the room.

“Is Matt doing okay?” She said.

“I think-”

“Yeah, I think he probably has a cold or something,” Chippy said, ignoring the steaming pan as he jumped over to grab

a glass of water. “Mmm, what are you guys making anyways?”

“A white lasagna,” I said, slightly irritated.

Colin returned a minute later and shoved a small jar into Chippy’s hand before he went back to the pan of sausage. “Shit man! This is burning,” he said, ripping the pan from the burner. “I thought I told you to watch it.”

“I only looked away for a second!” Chippy said, rushing over. “It isn’t that bad, is it?”

“No, no, it’s not,” Colin muttered. “Just a bit dried out.”

Chippy left and so did Renee once the conversation unavoidably touched on Sjur, too painful for either of us to address, but especially her. As a matter of fact, none of us could seem to bear repeating his name anymore, too painful to think about as it conjured up memories and images that can be best summarized by the two simple words, lost and cold. We all tried to forget in our own ways, either drowning it out in substances or obsessing over something so much that everything else just faded away; and as Colin concluded his cookery, too engrossed in it to see all the telltale signs of failure and inadequacy, it

inevitably came crashing down around him. The sausage, though burnt, was still manageable, but the substituted frozen vegetables seemed dry and freezer burnt, and the white sauce made of powdered milk turned lumpy, clumping together in starchy bubbles.

“Ugh, what is this?” Kaiser said, spitting some out into a napkin.

“It’s a lasagna bianca,” Colin murmured.

“It’s fine to me,” Jonathan said in a way that implied otherwise.

Matt made a horrible groaning sound, holding his head with one hand as he leaned back. “Oh my god,” he said in a gurgling moan. “That smell is making me sick,” and he groaned again. He suddenly stood up, all the blood rushing from his face as his hand crept over his mouth. “Oh god,” he said before he ran for the exit, but he didn’t make it far.

“Jesus christ, did he just pass out!” Erin said, shooting up from her seat as silverware, glasses, and plates knocked about.

He didn’t pass out, but the sounds and smells that came to follow are hard to describe other than that they were awful. We carried him upstairs and started running a cool bath, but before he could get in, he lurched forward and threw up into the toilet. I say threw up, but really he just sort of gagged, coughed, and spat out a thin stream of a dark brown, syrup like substance.

“Ugh, I think I’m better now,” he mumbled before plunging into the bath, but I don’t think any of us believed him.

“Shit man, what are we going to do?” Chippy said in the mezzanine hall. “He’s fucking terrible!”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What can we do?”

The next day, we did the one thing we could. The sun came out, and the wind was low, keeping the temperature around a manageable two degrees Fahrenheit. Kaiser, Chippy, and I got up early and went out to the garage to find anything we could clear the road with.

“Jonathan said there should be a four-wheeler in here,” Chippy said as Kaiser began working open the door.

“Who gives a shit what Jonathan says,” Kaiser spat.

Inside sat our three cars, along with the one Renee and Sjur came down in, all still, frozen, and lifeless. In a corner we found a few snow shovels, handy, but they alone couldn't get us out of here.

"Heh, a woodchipper," Chippy said from across the garage. "Lot of help that's gonna be."

Kaiser and I walked over to take a look, and were relieved by his ignorance.

"Chippy, that's not a woodchipper," Kaiser said. "That's a snowblower."

"Wait, really?" he said, looking at the thing again. "Bitch ass!"

We found the four-wheeler in the back, like Jonathan had told us, but it was pretty old and had a hard time working its way out through the snow by itself.

"Damn man, it won't go!" I shouted from atop it. "The snows too deep. We're going to have to clear it first!" And I took out the key.

We got to work with the shovels and Kaiser tried getting the snowblower up and running, a harder task than

originally thought, but before long it rumbled to life and began spitting out a volley of snow in a wide, long arch. The sound it made enveloped everything, a constant, deep, gurgling growl that was impossible to escape or ignore.

Within a few minutes we could move the four-wheeler out, and I began making some small passes around the driveway in front of them before I could start plowing a pathway. Over the next hour, a few of the others came out to help, and by noon most of the area around the garage, the side of the house, and in front had been cleared, but clearing the driveway and road leading up to the house proved to be far more difficult. Kaiser pushed the whirring and chugging machine up the driveway where we were met with a horrible coughing and twisting sound before it started spraying stones and rocks out with the snow, sending them across the yard, against the steps, the porch, and the side of Colin's car.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Kaiser said, jerking the thing back as he shut it off. "Too much gravel, can't use this thing till we get further away from the house."

"Come on, let's go inside for a bit," Chippy called, and we all agreed.

We all started walking up to the house, but right before we got inside, Matt came out, bundled up head to toe and seemingly fine, like nothing had been wrong with him for the past few days.

“Hey, y’all going inside right when I come out?” He said in a jovial tone.

“Matt! What are you doing?” Kaiser said, dripping with sweat.

“I feel fine. Figured I’d help.”

“Get back inside!” June shouted. “Or you’ll get sick again! It hasn’t even been a day since you threw up in the dining room.”

“I’m fine, really!” He said. “I think it was just a stomach bug or something I drank. But honestly, I’m much better now. I feel great,” and Chippy looked at me briefly.

“Alright, well, let’s see you eat something,” June said, wrapping her arm around him as she went inside. “If you still feel fine, then you can help us clear the road after.”

“Alright,” He said, and he put his arm around her. “I’m starving anyways.”

For lunch we made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, nothing special, but Matt downed them one after the other like they were popcorn. He must have eaten at least four, but honestly, I lost count. I myself was still unsure if he was actually feeling better, but he sure seemed to be, and maybe I was right all along, maybe it was just something small.

We went back outside around one o'clock. The wind picked up and we could see storm clouds off in the distance, but it wasn't bad enough to force us indoors yet. Chippy took over the four-wheeler, but when he went over to start plowing the road, he drove it straight into the deep snow, causing it to come to an immediate soft stop.

"It's still too deep over here," He said. "We're going to have to move some of it by hand before I can start clearing it out."

"Alright," Matt said, picking up one of the shovels. "Let's get on it."

Kaiser, Matt, and a few of the others, along with myself, got to work clearing out a small path along the side of the

road. The snow was at least two feet deep in most areas, and reached as high as four and five in others.

“Look at this!” Erin said to Chippy, who sat atop the four-wheeler. “It’s taller than me over here!”

“Well, most everything is taller than you!” Chippy laughed. “Thought you’d be used to that by now.”

“Well, yeah,” she said with a chuckle. “Just haven’t seen snow this deep ever, and I’m from here.”

It was so deep that finding a place to put it all became a problem. We first started shoveling it to the side of the road, but when Chippy ran through with the four-wheeler, there was nowhere for the snow to go, so it just got stuck again after about five feet.

“Stupid piece of shit!” He said, slamming the thing in reverse. “It can’t push an inch of snow, much less three feet of it. Fuck! And I’m freezing my ass off here!”

“It’s cause it has nowhere to go,” Matt said.

Kaiser decided to start running the snowblower again, this time on what was the sides of the road, and the rest of us got to shoveling it all up and onto the sides of the walls that

Kaiser carved out. Chippy ran the four-wheeler through again, but once it got stuck, we all decided that someone else should give it a try.

“No Thanks,” Matt said. “I’ll freeze if I stop moving.”

“I can,” I said, but Kaiser quickly shut the blower off and walked over.

“Here, can you keep pushing the snowblower,” He said to me. “I’ve been running it all day and would like to take a break.”

“Alright, fine,” I said.

“Okay, that button there just starts and stops it, and if it gets clogged, just shut it off.”

I got to work following the path that he started for me, but the machine still struggled to get through the deep snowdrifts. The rumbling and rattling drove me crazy, and the constant shaking of it made my hands sore, like the bones separated from the muscles and flesh of my hands before they slowly went numb. And the snow just kept coming, always more, more, more as it began falling again. I looked back and saw that we carved out a good twenty or

thirty feet of the driveway, but when I looked ahead, all I saw was an endless stream of white snow, surrounded by endless waves, surrounded by endless wilderness.

We soon decided that we had been outside long enough and packed everything back inside the garage before being welcomed back into the house by steaming mugs of hot chocolate.

“I don’t really like hot chocolate,” Kaiser said, putting his mug back down on the counter.

“Well, we’re almost out of coffee,” Colin said. “I’m saving it for the mornings.”

“Well, I want a cup,” He said, opening the cupboard and grabbing the can of grounds. “Does anybody else want any?”

Matt grabbed his cup of coco and sat down at the table, gently rubbing his head as he sipped from his mug.

“You feeling alright?” I asked him.

“Yeah, no, head just hurts a bit, that’s all.”

“Well, just take it easy,” I said. “Isn’t anything too bad, is it?”

“No,” He said. “I just think I hit it.”

“You hit it?” I said, slightly surprised. “How’d you do that?”

“I just bumped it in the garage,” he said before taking a slight sip. “Nothing too serious, I feel.”

“Cops called,” Jonathan said rather nonchalantly as he meandered into the room. He picked up a mug from the cabinet, filled it with some coco and turned around before continuing. “They said they haven’t been able to make it up due to the storm,” taking a gentle sip. “And they probably won’t make it up for a few more.”

“Why’s that?” Chippy said.

“Well, you were just out there,” Jonathan chuckled. “They can’t get up here and the roads are nearly impossible to clear in some areas.”

“No kidding,” Kaiser said as he started up the coffeemaker. “Snowing again too.”

“Well, what if we were starving or something?” Chippy said. “What if it were an emergency?”

“Well, lucky for us, we aren’t starving, and it’s not an emergency.” Jonathan said, but I don’t think I quite agreed with his last assessment, and neither did Kaiser.

“Not an emergency?” He said, turning around as the coffeemaker brewed and steamed behind him. “What do you mean, it’s not an emergency?”

“Look, Kaiser I didn’t mean it-”

“Sjur’s dead Jonathan! Let’s stop pretending like that didn’t happen.”

“He could-”

“He could what!” Kaiser snapped. “Be alive? You seriously think he could still be alive out in that! Have you been outside at all the last few days?”

“Well no, I’ve-”

“Heh, you know, it’s funny,” Kaiser interrupted as he poured his coffee. “We’re trying to get the road plowed to take Matt to the hospital, yet he came out to help before

you did.” And with that, he left, stomping up the stairs with his cup and leaving us all in silence, none more than Matt.

At around five o'clock, I started playing a game of chess with Chippy in the living space while Erin continued her painting. I was always decent at chess, but not great, about as good as you could get without knowing strategy. I had been in a chess club for a little bit when I was younger but so had Chippy, only difference was that he actually continued going up and through highschool.

“Ahh, the Scotch opening,” Chippy said, comically stroking his chin.

“If that’s what it’s called,” I said.

“What to do, what to do,” he said as he eyed the pieces. He sat there for a solid two minutes, talking to himself and toying with me. “Well, I could do that, and it’d be mate in six, no… eight actually, but… I could also do that, but do you see that coming? Hmm… I don’t know,” but he never got to finish his turn.

Matt was with us as well, but for the last hour he’d been fairly quiet, laying on the couch while he played a game on his phone. He suddenly got up while Chippy was still

pondering his move and just stood there for a moment. He took one step forward and collapsed onto the floor, knocking into the table and sending the board flying.

“Jesus christ! What the fuck, Matt,” Chippy said, catching some of the pieces before they fell to the ground. “Matt?”

Matt hadn’t just fallen, he passed out. We got him back onto the couch and tried to yell at him to wake up, but he wouldn’t. We tried shaking him and yelling some more, but it wasn’t until Chippy randomly slapped him across the face that he woke up.

“Are you okay? You feeling alright?” Erin asked.

“Hmm, yeah,” Matt said. “Yeah, what happened?”

We tried to get him to rest a bit longer, but he insisted that he was fine and wanted to take a shower. He started walking up the staircase, wobbling back and forth like a drunk before he stumbled about halfway up.

“Jesus christ, I’m fine!” He said in an irritated voice before anyone even moved.

“What’s going on?” Colin said, getting up from his chair in the parlor.

“Nothing,” I said as Matt finished climbing the stairs and disappeared.

“Come on,” Chippy said, motioning to me and Erin. He ran into the parlor, grabbing Colin by the arm and calling for Jonathan to follow as we went downstairs.

“Hey, ow!” Colin said. “What the fuck, man! What are you doing? Let me go!”

“Fine, shut up!” He said, relinquishing his grip as we moved to the basement.

“Where’s Kaiser?” I asked.

“He’s upstairs or something,” Jonathan replied. “Why, what’s going on?”

“Matt just passed out,” Erin said.

“What!” Colin exclaimed. “Well, where is he? Is he okay? Did he wake up?”

“Yes, he woke up,” I said. “He’s taking a shower now, but I don’t think he’s okay.”

“We need to do something,” Chippy pleaded.

“Like what?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t know!” Chippy said. “But he just passed the fuck out, and he’s been ralfing his brains out for the past couple days. We don’t know what’s wrong with him and just telling him he’s fine isn’t going to solve anything,” eying me.

“Exactly. We don’t know what he has. Doesn’t mean that it’s serious,” Jonathan replied.

“He just passed out! Do you not hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you,” Jonathan said calmly. “So does everyone else in the house, I’d say. I’m just saying that we don’t know what he has, and there’s not much we can do until the cops get up here. You can continue trying to clear the road, but I don’t think that’s going to help much until the cops can get up here themselves.”

“So, what are you saying? That we should just wait until they get here?” Chippy spat.

Jonathan looked at him rather plainly. “Yes,” he said. “If you have a better idea, then I’m all ears, but I doubt you do.”

Over the next couple of days, Matt basically became bedridden. He didn't eat anything besides the occasional bite from a piece of plain toast or bowl of oatmeal and jam. We hadn't heard anything back from the cops yet, and due to the constant winds and storms, our progress with the road grew painfully slow. Chippy, Erin, June, Renee and I all helped whenever we could, and even Colin joined in once, but the majority of it was done by Kaiser. Day in and day out, he'd spend his time out in the blistering cold, clearing a path down the mountain while simultaneously becoming more distant and reclusive.

"What do you want?" He spat one day after working out in the snow all morning.

"Nothing," I said, taken aback.

"Well, maybe you could help me outside. I've been out there all day clearing that damn road and I hardly ever see any of you lift a finger," He said, downing a cup of coffee before he stormed back outside.

Renee and I managed to get some time alone together, but something always seemed to interrupt us when we were intimate, whether that be someone barging into the room or Kaiser staying up late into the night just sitting mindlessly in the hallway outside my door. Kaiser only recently started this odd nightly routine of his; he'd come in late after working on the road all day just to sit in the upstairs hallway staring at the wall. I remember one night Renee was with Colin and I in our room, playing cards to pass the time. None of us spoke, and the only sounds were of the cards being shuffled, the wind outside, and Colin pulling the cork from the wine bottle to pour more into our glasses. We stayed like this until at least two in the morning, but around that time, we heard a sudden pounding sound come from the wall just next to the door.

"Jesus Christ!" I said, jumping up in surprise. "What was that?"

"It wasn't Matt again, was it?" Colin said, following me as I went over and opened the door.

I swung it open only to find Kaiser sitting on the floor and playing catch with a ball like Steve McQueen in The Great

Escape. “What,” He said in an annoyed voice, raising a cigarette to his mouth as he threw the ball again.

“Nothing,” I said. “You think you can keep it down a bit, though?”

He blew out a cloud of smoke, turned, and looked at me for a solid second before he threw the ball again. “Sure,” he said, catching it before he stood up and turned to leave, tossing it one last time as he walked down the hallway.

I stirred from a terrible dream in a cold sweet. We were out hunting again, Jonathan, Matt, Chippy, Kaiser and I. We were hunting an owl, on purpose this time, and the dogs ran out into the forest after it. I remember we ran after them and somehow got split up, and before long, I was somehow back in the house. I was trying to find Renee, but the entire house was empty, and no matter how much I screamed and searched, nobody would answer. I soon became trapped, unable to find an exit or another living soul until I looked in a mirror and saw my reflection. What I

saw terrified me, and I was so startled that I woke up, though not completely.

I opened my eyes and saw my room around me, though everything about it was dark, vague. When I looked over to where Colin lay, I couldn’t recognize him, and instead saw a nebulous mass, some unclear shape that expanded and contracted itself against the wall and above his bed. I looked around and could see things moving and lurking within the corners of the room, cloaked things that hid in the shadows and never revealed more than a hand, a limb, or a shrouded face. I went to get up but suddenly realized I had no control over my body, my arms and legs jerking rapidly like the sputtering of an old car that simply refused to start. I was frozen, petrified with fear as something brushed against my shoulder, murmuring into my ear before I was overcome with the deafening sounds of droning biplanes, and depth charges sinking through the murky shroud of my soul.

When I did finally wake up, I picked up my phone and saw that it was the sixth of January, meaning we only had ten days left, but then I got anxious, because we had ten days

left. Colin was still asleep, so I slipped on some fresh clothes and snuck out as quietly as I could to not wake him.

The entire house was still and quiet, like in my dream. I cleaned myself up and went downstairs to start brewing a pot of coffee, but was disappointed to find only a few beans in the bottom of the last can. I started boiling some water for tea and looked out the window as the steam slowly fogged the glass.

“Morning,” said a somber voice from behind me.

“Oh, hey Jonathan,” I said, turning around to see him standing there pouring a glass of orange juice. He looked like he mostly recovered from Kaiser’s beating on New Years, only a few small scabs remained with some mild discoloration on his face. “Is that stuff any good?” I asked.

“It’s fine enough, I guess. There’s a pitcher in the fridge if you want any,” He said before taking a slow sip. “Tastes a bit off, though.” He walked over next to me and started looking out the window. “How’ve you been holding up, Marcus? You don’t look too well.”

I just stood there for a moment, trying to think of how to answer him. “I don’t know,” I said. “Trying to do better. Just a bit groggy still, I think. Why? How are you doing?”

“Oh, well, Kaiser’s out there again. Plowing that road. Wasting time.”

“Right now?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Well, at least it’s not snowing right now,” I said. “Should be able to get a good bit done.”

“He said he made it about halfway to the bridge, though I kind of doubt that. And the snow’s going to come back and just cover it all again anyway. I’m just surprised he hasn’t broke anything yet.”

I almost wanted to ask him why he doubted Kaiser, or why he was surprised he hadn’t broken anything yet, but instead I poured my tea water and went into the living room.

Erin’s painting hadn’t progressed much since last I saw it. In fact, it almost looked like it regressed, somehow showing more emptiness now than before. Her strange and abstract

ways of depicting the house were foreign to me, and yet they evoked the same feeling the house itself gave me now. The way it loomed over and stretched across the canvas, casting a long shadow across the rest of the piece, impossible to escape or ignore. It gave me an unnerving sense of dread, and when I leaned in to take a closer look, I swore I saw someone in the window of the living room before my attention was pulled away.

“Oh, sorry,” said a meek voice from behind me. “I didn’t know anyone was in here.”

I turned around and was met with the face of Sarah Walther. I stood there surprised, as I nearly forgot she existed. “Oh, hey!” I said. “What are you up to?”

“Just trying to find a quiet place to read,” she said, starting to turn away.

“Oh, what are you reading?”

“The Rules of Sociological Method,” she said, turning back. “By Emile Durkheim.”

“Oh! I think I read some of that for a class once,” I said with a laugh. “But I don’t really remember much of it.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Yeah, so are you reading it for a class too?”

“No,” she said. “My thesis project, actually.”

“Oh, nice,” I said. “Hey, so… why did you decide to come here? And why mid break?”

“Well… I’m on the Dean’s list, and he told me I could come by after Christmas,” she said rather matter-of-factly. “Well, I’m going to go read. Goodbye,” she said before turning away to leave downstairs.

I looked back at the painting for a second but was interrupted a second time, this time by Remus. He ran up to me and started whimpering while jumping up and down at my feet, licking my hands as I bent down to pet him.

“What is it, boy?” I said, looking into his brown eyes. “You need to go outside?”

I led him out through the kitchen and opened the screen door. He seemed to hesitate for a moment as a gust of icy wind came through and chilled the room.

“Go on,” I said, ushering him with a swing of my hand, and he ran out. The door slammed shut, and I looked out for a second as I took a sip of my tea, watching the wind roll across the landscape, picking up loose flakes from trees and scattering them like ashes in the fall. ‘This damn snow,’ I thought. ‘How could something so dangerous look so beautiful?’ I went to turn away, but before I did, I could just see a speck of someone walking down the driveway. I looked a little longer before I realized it was Kaiser, dragging the snow blower behind him. I grabbed my coat and ran out to see what happened or if I could help in any way.

“Hey!” I shouted, tromping through the snow. “What’s the matter? Did it break?”

“No,” He said, out of breath. “Ran out of gas. Gonna have to siphon some out of the cars,” trudging on to the garage.

“Here, let me take that,” I said. “Must have been dragging it for a minute.”

“About ten, but yeah, thanks,” he said as I took it and handed him my cup of tea, which he promptly gulped down.

He opened the door to the garage, and I pushed the blower right up to his car.

“Do you have any gas to spare?” He asked.

“I don’t know, let me check,” I said, grabbing my keys from my coat pocket and starting up my car. Surprisingly, it started right away again, and the needle flicked up and hovered just under three quarters of a tank. “Yeah, I got some,” I said, shutting it off again. “But not a lot.”

“Alright, I got some to spare too. We should have enough between the two to last a couple days then,” he said, grabbing a can and a long piece of plastic tubing from the workbench. “Alright, let’s see here,” He said, feeding the tube down into my car’s gas tank. He stuck a second smaller tube in at the top and wrapped it in a rag before he began blowing into it and gas came out the first. He let it drain a bit longer than I thought necessary, and for a second I wondered if he was even going to take any out of his own tank.

“I think that should be good,” I said.

“Yeah, just a little more,” he said, letting it drain a couple of seconds longer before he pulled the tube back out. He

walked over and did the same with his own car, but as I suspected, he only let his drain maybe half as long as mine. “That should be good for now,” He said, putting the cap on the can.

I spent a good amount of the day helping him clear the road, and we actually made it pretty far, considering the tools we were working with. We made it so deep into the surrounding forest that there wasn’t much to look at besides the trees, the snow, and the road. Ancient pines swayed overhead, carrying the brunt of winter’s snow. Every once in a while a tiny songbird fluttered overhead, singing its gentle songs of spring before it was drowned out by the rumble of the machines.

We called it quits at about six o’clock. The wind was still light and it hadn’t snowed again yet, but the temperature dropped almost twenty degrees in the last hour and was still dropping fast. The bridge wasn’t much further, and unless we were set back, there would be no problem reaching it tomorrow.

That night I had a particularly hard time falling asleep, and it felt like something or someone was in my bed with me. Like a small animal was crawling around or something

much larger was shifting and squirming. More than once I thought one of Dean Hall's dogs may have somehow jumped up and started rolling around, except whenever I would open my eyes to check, nothing was there.

After wrestling with this for about two hours, I went downstairs to find something to calm my nerves. It was about 11 or 12 at night, and the house creaked and moaned with every step I took. I found a few of the others downstairs, Kaiser and Chippy, both sitting at the table, trying to figure out something, anything, to get lost in.

"Marcus," Chippy said, reminiscent of his more energetic greetings, but not quite up to the same level. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No," I said, slipping into a chair next to him.

"Say, you or Colin don't happen to have any bud left, do you?"

"No, I never had any to begin with. But I can ask Colin."

"Oh, don't do that," Kaiser said, blowing a mouthful of smoke. "He'll just get mad."

“Yeah, well, there’s next to no alcohol left either. This vodka was pretty much all I could find besides some wine,” Chippy said, lifting the cheap bottle up for me to see. “Shit tastes like bug spray and I haven’t even got a buzz yet.”

“Well, I don’t doubt its taste,” I said, picking it up and pouring myself a shot. “Yup, smells like it,” I said before I downed the glass. “So are you out of bud then?”

“Yeah, I got some of my dab pen left, but it’s charging right now.”

“You have any edibles left?” I asked.

“I had two capsules, and we took those a couple hours ago. I still don’t feel anything,” and Kaiser nodded in agreement.

“Just want to get our minds off all this shit and can’t even do that,” Kaiser said, pouring himself another shot.

I thought for a moment about what, if anything, was left that we could take to forget about all this. Then my mind stopped on something, though I wish it hadn’t, or maybe I could’ve been smart and kept it to myself, but part of me really wanted to take it then, a stupid part of me. “What

about the acid?” I said, immediately biting my tongue after. But the words were already spoken, and thoughts soon followed.

“What?” Chippy said, turning to look at me, his words neither scolding nor encouraging.

“He asked if you have any acid left.”

“Yeah, six tabs. But I think that taking them right now would be a pretty shit idea.”

Silence sat for a minute as my words wormed their way through their heads, and before long, they started entertaining ideas.

“Well, two tabs would probably only last until noon or so at the latest,” Kaiser said. “And most everyone is asleep right now.”

After a few more minutes and points about how it could possibly be a good idea, Chippy submitted, “Okay, okay,” he said. “I’m going to get it.” A long, heavy silence sat between me and Kaiser until Chippy finally returned. Once or twice it looked like he was going to say something, and I thought about speaking myself, but neither of us did.

“Alright boys,” Chippy said, reentering the room a minute later. “Just cause we’re snowed in, and all shit has went south doesn’t mean we can’t have a good time,” handing us each two tabs.

“I think it’d be best if we stay somewhere safe though, somewhere nobody will bother us,” I said. “Also, I have a little whiskey left I can grab.”

“Let’s move down to the game room,” Kaiser suggested.

“Wait, you have some whiskey left?”

“Yeah, I still have the flask that Colin gave me on Christmas.”

“Bitch ass!” Chippy said, warmly patting me on the back. “Shit, and I think I still have that brownie somewhere, actually! The one from Christmas.”

“Great,” I said, quickly departing before any other memories of Christmas and what followed could resurface.

I went upstairs and quickly found my flask in the drawer where I left it, right next to Colin’s. I thought about grabbing his as well, he probably forgot about it anyway, but when he started to shift in his bed, I decided not to.

“What are you doing?” he asked, in a groggy mumble.

“Just grabbing my toothbrush,” I said. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

I ran down and met Kaiser in the game room, already at work queuing up music to last our trip, and soon Chippy came down, brownie in hand.

“Found it!” He said, immediately breaking off chunks to give us. “It was in the sweater I wore that night.”

“Sweet, thanks man,” I said, taking my tab out for a second to eat the brownie before I put it back in.

Kaiser quickly shoveled in his brownie before he grabbed a pool cue and began rubbing chalk on its tip. “Marcus, you don’t mind racking, do you?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” I said, grabbing the triangle from the other end of the table.

“Wait, I wanna play too,” Chippy said.

“No one said you can’t. We’ll just play high, low, mid,” Kaiser said, practicing his shot at the far end. “Can I see that whiskey flask of yours?”

We played a couple of games while Prayer In C by Robin Schulz and other EDM songs hummed through the speakers. I wasn't great at the game, and Chippy wasn't much better, but Kaiser seemed to know what he was doing, though he still fumbled a few easy shots here and there to which Chippy would roar with laughter and Kaiser and I would inevitably join in. I was having such a good time with them that I completely forgot about the blizzard outside, about the house, or anyone else, for that matter.

"Son of a bitch!" Chippy said before he began laughing again. "I scratched."

After about an hour and four increasingly long games, we all had enough of pool. We shuffled over to the poker table and started playing a few hands of Texas Hold Em'. After about twenty minutes though, it devolved into a game of go fish, and then war.

"I don't care what you say, war has to be one of the best card games out there," Chippy said.

Kaiser grumbled as he lost another round to Chippy. "Yeah, but it doesn't require any skill."

“You know, a couple friends and I made up a game pretty similar to war back in middle school. It requires a little bit more skill than war, but it still has the same feel. I can teach you if you want,” I said, shuffling the deck.

“Yeah, sure,” Kaiser said.

“Hey, I’m on a roll here!” Chippy interjected. “Can’t just switch games like that!”

“We’ve already done it twice,” Kaiser said. “What’s it called anyway?”

“Castle, but back in school we called it Halo,” I said, dealing out the cards into three even piles. “It’s basically just war, but taken a step further. See, you set your cards out face down into a grid, whatever shape or size you like, you just can’t look at them. You can even set some cards aside as reinforcements if you want, they just use one of your turns to enter but that’s not really useful until later in the game. It functions the same as war, you just attack with one of the cards furthest along a column and they attack your opponent’s similarly, higher card wins and you keep what you kill for the next game but jokers are suicide bombers, they kill anything but die in the process, and thus

go to the opponent. Cards are turned face up when attacking or once attacked. You can attack once a turn or reinforce instead if you choose. Aces are the highest but twos can kill them, and any ties simply result in both cards dying," I concluded once I finished arranging my cards.

We played a couple hands, but once Kaiser started leading, Chippy wanted to switch back to war, and so we obliged him. The first signs of the drug's effects set in around that time. First it was the tiny swirls and designs of the cards shifting, not much, but noticeable. Then came the THC, making everything feel funny and obnoxious, and hilarity ensued. We tried switching back to poker, but none of us could take anything seriously. I remember throwing away a hand of pocket queens just for another one to turn up.

"You fucking idiot!" Chippy laughed, and we all laughed.

We kept playing cards, though not very seriously, for the next hour or so as we carried on strange conversations about topics any outsider would have completely drowned in; concepts and ideas no sane or sober man would touch or speak on.

“Like what if Marshall Applewhite was right? Or Marilyn Manson-”

“Charles Manson,” Kaiser corrected.

“Yeah, that’s what I meant. I mean, the only difference I see between cults and religions is the amount of followers,” Chippy said. “Organized religions are just massive watered down cults.”

“But what about ghosts and aliens and shit?” I said, like we were on a quest to discover the mysteries of the universe. “What if they’re just people from different realities leaking into our own? Or maybe it’s got something to do with rebirth, you know? Like how some people are able to see ghosts, and people who don’t believe in ghosts can’t. What if it’s a belief thing like religion? What if ghosts are just like your past self trying to steer you in the right direction? Or maybe they’re a different part of yourself… Or… like the pyramids and the ancient world and all that shit. Like how they would talk to the auroras on Mount Olympus, and they’d predict stuff exactly right. Like what if it was just their past or future selves telling them how stuff would go down?”

“So one thing I’ve always thought about,” Kaiser started. “What if, like…when you look at all the planets and the galaxies and stuff, the whole universe looks like a cluster of atoms, or like neurological pathways, synapses and stuff. What if we’re all just living in someone’s brain? And like what if no matter what you do it doesn’t matter, because whatever this guy thinks up is just going to happen.”

“Or like go back to what I was saying about ghosts and stuff,” I said. “What if we’re all just living in our own brains? Like in separate universes that are closely tied together. And like, look and feel around you, right? It all sort of feels like a dream, right?”

“That’s cause we’re on acid,” Chippy chuckled.

“Yeah, but-” I had to stop and laugh for a second before I continued. “But what if we’re all sort of linking right now?”

“What do you mean?” Kaiser asked before he caught a case of the giggles himself.

“Like, what if we’re all on the same plane right now, the same plane of understanding? Like because we all took acid-”

“We’re all sort of pulled into the same universe or something,” Kaiser said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Yeah,” Chippy said. “Like whenever I take acid with someone, I feel like I understand them more. Like I… we’re going through the same things and understand each other.”

“Like everyone else is fake,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Like we’re the only real people left.”

After this, we sort of just sat there, looking around and taking everything in. Bright, vibrant colors shot in and out of my peripheral, while random incoherent thoughts bounced in and out of my head. ‘Time to pretend,’ ‘Vanish from the dark,’ ‘I can’t sleep,’ ‘Am I destined to do something?’ ‘Erase me,’ ‘Apologize,’ ‘Is Matt going to be okay?’ ‘How’s it gonna end?’

“I think my future self is telling me to go find some drink,” Kaiser said as he got up from the table. “I’ll be right back, I’m going to grab some of the wine quickly,” He said, looking at both of us with glassy eyes before he wobbled upstairs.

“Hoo hoo hoo! Weh heh he!” Chippy said. “I got to go pee!” And he wandered off to the downstairs bathroom, leaving me alone in the room.

“Tick tock, di di di do do,” the speakers hummed. “Time keeps on slippin, slippin, slippin, into the future.”

I sat there, contemplating and complementing the lyrics of every song that clicked on, and then I realized half the songs didn’t have lyrics. Where was I exactly? What was I doing? Where was everybody? Well, Chippy was in the bathroom and Kaiser ventured upstairs but hadn’t returned yet, and everyone else was just a vague, distant memory. Where were they? Why were they taking so long? Were they ever going to come back?

“Shit man! Shit man! Oh, shit man!” Chippy said, suddenly bursting back into the picture. “Oh, fucking shit man!”

“What? What the hell is it?” I said, suddenly perking up.

“Where the fuck is Kaiser?” He said. “Is he fucking dead? Did he get lost out in the cold? Did he die out in the blizzard too!”

“What?” I said. “No, no! He just went upstairs to get some wine for us. He’ll be back in a minute.”

“What? No!” He said. “I saw it! Through the window in the bathroom! He ran off into the storm! He’s dead!”

“No Chippy!” I said. “Sit down, he didn’t go outside, he told me.”

“What?” he said.

“He didn’t go outside. He just went to go get some wine.”

“Oh,” He said. “Oh yeah, he did.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. Yes, that’s right, I remember. So where is he then?”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Well, he’s been gone for almost an hour.”

“What?” I said. “No, he’s been gone for maybe five minutes.”

“Dude, it’s four o’clock,” he said.

I checked my watch. He was right. “Alright,” I said. “Let’s go find him.”

But before we could set out on our journey, Kaiser stomped down, one bottle in each hand. “Go, go, go!” He said, hurrying down the stairs and into the room. “I got it!” He slumped back down into one of the chairs, quite out of breath and shaken.

“You got it!” Chippy said. “You made it!”

“Just barely,” Kaiser replied, brushing his hair out of his eyes. “Had a run in with Jonathan, and then an entire interrogation.”

“Shit man, what’d he say?” I asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it. He was just an uptight prick,” Kaiser said, anger starting to seep through his words. He sat for a second, the rage boiling in his stomach before it burst out into the fold. “What are you doing up? Are you drunk? Are you high? What’s going on? Dah dah dah! Go to bed. Get yourself together. Jesus fucking christ! He won’t just shut up and let me be! And he’s such a fucking hypocrite, too! Like, what are you doing up? Are you

fucking high? God! He won’t get off my fucking ass about everything! I can’t stand him anymore.”

“Well, fuck him then,” Chippy said. “He’s been a dick to me since I got here.”

“And he has to drag me into everything he does, every shitty decision he makes, he has to drag me into as well…” We all sat in silence as he stared at the wall. Eventually, he pulled out a cigar and lit it up, but his eyes remained fixed. “You know,” he said. “Nietzsche said that to fully evolve, into what he called the Ubermensch, a man who can think and act on his own volition, one must first battle a great dragon whose scales are etched with the words thou shall, and to slay it one must say a sacred phrase, I will. I don’t know… but I think my dragon’s been following me around for quite some time now, and slaying him will be no easy task.”

Chippy and I just sat there staring at him for a second. Was he actually planning on killing Jonathan, or was he meaning metaphorically? But after a moment, my mouth opened, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s it.”

“Watched a video on it last night, actually.”

“No shit,” he said and laughed.

The first bottle was a sweet white wine, which seemed to evaporate as soon as it was opened. The second, though, a bitter dry red, didn’t disappear quite as fast as the first and lingered for a long time. I don’t remember what followed for the next hour and a half, what we did, what we talked about, or if we even talked at all, time simply collapsed. At 4:27, though, someone slowly began walking down the steps. I remember it specifically because we all shot up and instantly became anxious, recalling our conversation about Jonathan.

“Shit man, is it him?” Chippy said, leaning over to try to catch a glimpse of the intruder. “We need to turn off the music.”

“No,” Kaiser hushed. “They’ll be down before we make it over there.”

When they finally reached the bottom, my heart stopped. It was Renee. ‘What the fuck, what am I going to do,’ I thought. ‘She’s going to be able to tell I’m fucking crazy in a second!’

“What are you guys doing? Have you been up all night?” She asked from the doorframe.

“Studying,” Kaiser said after too long of a pause.

“What?” she said with her accent leaking through. “Studying… what?”

“Heb,” I said. ‘What the fuck? That’s not even a word.’ I meant to say hey, but even that wouldn’t have made good sense.

“Heb? What’s that?” Renee asked, now even more confused.

“He’s a philosopher I’m doing a paper on,” Chippy chimed in.

“Next semester?”

“No, a paper,” Chippy replied, and she looked at him dumbfoundedly for a second. “Oh, yeah, yes!” He said, smacking his head with the palm of his hand. “That’s what I meant.”

“Oh, well, how is all of that going?”

Chippy blew through his loose lips like a horse. “Umm… well!”

“Oh, good,” she said, slowly sidestepping her way towards us. “Marcus, how are you?” She said with a brief glimmer of a smile.

“Ehh,” I moaned, rolling my head back. “Trying to do better. How have you been? I haven’t seen you much lately,” I managed to say without a single stutter or mumble.

“Oh… doing better,” she said, her gaze pulled down to the floor.

I looked down to where she was gazing and the carpet immediately began to swirl and flow like a small stream, all the little fibers moving with each other like paint in water. It apparently held my attention more than I realized as Renee had been trying to ask me a question for a few seconds before I realized she was speaking again. “Huh?” I said, ripping my gaze up from the floor.

“Are you doing okay?” She said in a tone like she repeated it multiple times before, and Chippy chuckled.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, but my eyes soon fixed on the wall behind her.

“He ate an edible earlier,” Kaiser said with a chuckle.

“Oh, well, I’m going to take a shower, but after that we could watch a movie or something,” she said with another meek smile.

“Oh, yeah, okay,” I said, but my attention was still on the wall, which appeared more like a thick layer of sand gliding across a slow-moving treadmill. “Sounds good,” repositioning my gaze to her, but after a few seconds, I had to pull it away again as it appeared to distort, like there were bubbles forming just below the surface of her skin.

“Okay,” she said, turning to Kaiser for a brief second before he burst out in a stifled laugh, and she left.

“Shit, do we have any of that red left?” Kaiser asked as he started to regain control of his composer.

“It’s sitting right in front of you,” Chippy said.

“Oh,” He replied, picking up the bottle and pulling the cork out. He lifted it up and drank from it, splashing some down his check and onto the collar of his shirt. I almost said

something to him, but refrained from doing so as he soon found out for himself and seemed to brush it off like it was nothing.

“What was that?” Chippy said with a chuckle once she had definitely left.

“I don’t know,” I said, and I literally didn’t as it now appeared to me like a vague dream, even though it happened only moments before. “What?”

“Renee!” Chippy said. “She was pissed at you!”

“What, when?” I said.

“Just now!”

“What? No!” I said. “She was just wondering how we were doing.”

“Well she was,” Chippy said.

“No!” Kaiser interjected. “She wanted to take a shower and see you after a movie.”

“Oh, yeah.” Chippy said. “I was just kidding, anyway,” he laughed.

“Wait, so then why’s she mad at me?” I said.

“She’s not.”

“But I thought you said she was?”

“She was, but now she’s not, I guess,” Chippy said.

“Well shit, should I go talk to her?” I said.

“I don’t know,” Chippy rolled out.

“No,” Kaiser said. “She said she’d watch a film with you later.”

After a minute of thinking to myself and some convincing from Kaiser’s music, Homecoming by Kanye West, I decided I should go try to talk to her. “I’ll be back,” I said. “I’m gonna go talk with her,” before I abruptly left. I don’t think either of them even noticed, as Chippy stared at the green fibers of the table, and Kaiser sat slumped in his chair, head hanging low and eyes shut.

I lumbered up the staircase that stretched before me, like the throat of some snake that swallowed me down into its gullet. Once I got to the top, I realized I was the only living thing that stirred in the upper levels of the house.

Everything around me shifted and swayed, not so much as singular entities, but as one, like the house itself was breathing in and out with each breath I took. Nothing jumped out at me but a few things caught my attention, though it wasn't due to any sudden attack or springing of some trap, it was more like I stumbled upon them, like a bird spooked by one's presence. And with that said, even then, everything around me moved with slow, subtle caution, so as to not spook me in return, or at least not that much.

I found a few of the others fast asleep, some in the parlor, and Colin in the living room; which I had an odd feeling about but couldn't quite put my finger on why. Everyone looked so perfectly asleep that I thought it seemed like some sort of sin to wake them. They reminded me of old pictures of sleeping dwarves or gnomes in fairy tales, so perfectly at peace that they may never wake up again, and if they were to wake, they may find themselves in a worse place than the one they left. But at the same time I couldn't help but feel like something was off, or even wrong about it, like something at any second could burst through a window or the door and I'd be the only person to know. I had to tell somebody or let them know somehow, but how

could I do that without waking them up? This was somehow my responsibility, to watch over them as they slept, and waking them to tell them of the danger would only be running from my own responsibility.

When the grandfather clock rang five, I remember suddenly jolting to life again, like one of the seven great seals had broken. I ran into the foyer and saw it standing, or more like lurching over me, dawning the coming of some great event. I turned and saw the painting of the snow owl, its eyes piercing me like a knife as it searched my soul.

“Marcus!”

The voice startled me before I recognized who it was. I turned around and saw Renee standing at the top of the staircase and at once felt like every torment and cruel plague I had witnessed vanished. There she was, wearing the sweater from Kaiser as she glided down the steps, her short breaths hanging out in front of her. Her hair was still wet and clung together in a ruffled manner, but I don’t think it could have looked more perfect. She walked up and embraced me, her warm pale cheek against mine, the sweet scent of her hair, jasmine, but right then it was all the most wonderful smell in the world.

“How was your shower?” I asked as I looked over her thin neck and chest, slowly breathing in and out, down to her waist and hips.

“Oh, it was nice. A little cold,” she said, looking up at me with her deep brown eyes.

“Well, let’s go warm up then,” I said. “Wouldn’t want you to catch a cold or something.”

We went into the parlor and started a fire while the others continued sleeping. Instead of it just being me looking over them now, it was both of us, and that comforted me. We sat together on my chair and watched Stranger Things on her phone; I hadn’t seen any of it before and this was mid season three, but I didn’t mind.

After many questions from me about what was going on, though, she asked, “Do you just want to start from the beginning?”

“Sure,” I said. “Is it long?”

“Yes, but I don’t mind,” she said.

We sat there together for over an hour and not a single person stirred. I leaned over to kiss her on the cheek and

noticed she was wearing the earrings I gave her. I almost said something but decided not to, and instead I just kissed her like I was going to.

“What is it?” she said.

“Nothing.”

I think she could tell that something was up with me, as she looked at me, got up, and said she was going to go grab some firewood.

“Wait, no there’s plenty,” I said, tuning to the stack, but there wasn’t much. “But you don’t have to go right now,” I said.

“It’s fine, I’ll be right back,” she said, but somehow, even then, I knew it wouldn’t be fine.

“Okay,” I said. “Do you want me to pause it for you?”

“No, I’ve seen it before,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

But she wasn’t. I got lost and sucked into the screen, losing track as the minutes ticked by, and the fire died down into a few cold embers. I looked around and saw the house had taken on its sinister qualities once more. Everything leaned

in around me, pulling me in and scraping at me with nasty thoughts and horrible nightmarish visions. I tried ignoring them, but I soon heard voices whispering just out of sight, yet all around me, begging, nagging, teasing me, telling me to venture out into the cold, and I soon felt myself growing cold, terribly cold. It was then I remembered Renee. Where was she? Why hadn't she returned yet? I had to find her.

I got up and even though I knew not where my shoes and coat were, I soon found them, like the house itself led me to them, gifting them to me before I set out on my journey. I slung them on and slowly inched my way towards the screen door. Part of me didn't want to go out, but the other part of me knew I had to; and so did the house, or whatever spirit possessed it. The door opened, and I went out.

I didn't know where I was. Everything looked familiar yet distorted by some dream, not necessarily a bad one yet though, which I feel is important to note. The wind was to my back, and like everything in the entire world, it pushed me forward, and I ran; the snow no longer held me back, I glided through it, the pastel clouds above pulled me along with them, the birds fluttering above told me where to go,

and even the pine trees pointed the way. They knew, and soon I knew, what had happened.

I found the shed standing alone once more with its door shut, but it did not open up to me this time. It felt like it was wedged or frozen shut, like the world suddenly turned against me, telling me that if I wanted to find out what was inside, I'd have to do it myself.

"Renee, Renee!" I yelled. "Are you in there?" but there was no sound. "Renee please!" I screamed, and for a second I thought I heard a murmur, but it quickly faded.

I looked over to the right and saw it, the axe. It was still outside, lodged into the stump where Kaiser left it. I grabbed and yanked it from its previous lodging, a lone woodchip flying up with it before it was carried off with the breeze. It felt almost weightless in my hands, and I looked over at the door of the shed. 'That's why it was here. That's why I saw it.'

I took it, heaving it up and smashing it into the door's face again and again. Whispers fluttered around me once more. "Marcus, Marcus," they said. Some of them encouraged, others laughed, but most I ignored as shards and splitters

flung out, scraping at my face and eyes as I ignored them too. Birds floated down and sat staring at me, watching with their black hollow eyes as the darkness broke through and opened up before me, but it wasn't me it swallowed up, not this time.

In the back of the shed lay Renee. Her thin white hands clutched some old ratty blanket she found around her neck, and her hair now sat flowing around it, filled with the dust and wood chips that covered the floor. She appeared like some angelic creature that fell to earth, that died, and this was her coffin, her tomb. 'But not yet.'

"Renee!" I said, running over to her. "Renee, say something!" I scooped her up into my arms before I stood up and stumbled for a second, but I couldn't fall, not now. "Renee, please!"

Her eyes opened just barely, and she looked at me. "Marcus," she whispered. "The door."

"Renee, it's going to be okay. I'm going to get you inside," I said, but somehow I knew it wasn't true, and I cried. "Renee, hold on to me," I said. "I'm going to take you back home."

The wind was now in my face and the trees danced maliciously against the sky, taunting and reaching out for us, grasping for their eternal princess that was being stolen from them. I wasn't strong and never really have been, but somehow I forgot that. Tears rolled down my cheeks and froze to my skin as I moved as fast as I could, her arms and legs dangling loosely around me.

"Look," I said, trying desperately to think of anything else. "Look at the sky." It was the one thing that told me everything might be okay, too beautiful for death. "Just look," I said, and she opened her eyes a little, and saw what I saw; massive gargantuan forms formed of distant pastels slowly lumbered by overhead, not storm clouds at all, but clouds of spring, of life, of rebirth, clouds that awoke with a sun that shined almost disrespectfully bright.

"They're beautiful," she murmured as her eyes closed again.

"So are you," I said. "And look, we're almost to the house." Some of her loose hairs floated around me in the wind, thin rainbows that reflected tiny specs of light like fireflies. I looked up and I both figuratively and literally thought that

the sun had risen to save us, to banish the dark, but I've since found that beliefs are often ill founded.

The house suddenly rose up like an inky black hand, stretching and engulfing the sky, swallowing the sun whole. I pulled open its door, ready to delve into its depths, as I carried Renee over to a chair. "Wait here," I said. "I'll be right back." I ran through the kitchen and to the parlor, but the entire house seemed to be spinning, twisting, contorting, and it made me dizzy, forcing me to cling to the walls and catch my breath. I had to wake someone up to help me, to help Renee, but no one would, then I remembered my thoughts from earlier. This was my responsibility, my fault, I had to find the answer myself. I felt in my pockets and found my car keys. "I'll be right back. It's going to be okay," I said as I ran past her and back outside. I remembered what I said about going to the hospital, about the roads, about the storm, but I didn't care anymore. I knew, or at least I thought I knew, what I had to do.

I found my car in the garage sitting perfectly still where I left it. When I turned the key, it came to life immediately. It wouldn't let me down, not yet. I could feel it, like I

connected to its spirit through the steering wheel, the floor, and all about me, and I could tell it wasn't doing good. It felt sickly. I opened the garage door and rolled the car slowly to the front of the house, and for a second it looked like the snow was going to engulf the car from under me, but that didn't happen. I rushed inside and picked up Renee, carrying her out and placing her in the passenger seat before I drove away. I didn't know if we would return, or if I even wanted to, all I knew was that I had to get Renee out of there.

The car skidded and slid around every corner, squealing and groaning out in pain as it went faster and faster. Overhead, large sweeping clouds rolled in, covering the once pastel sky in a blanket of gray. Snow began to lightly fall and sweep up around the car, sticking to it like thousands of tiny souls trying to stop me and turn me around.

"Marcus," Renee whispered. "Marcus."

"Don't talk Renee. Everything is going to be okay. Just save your strength," I said as my car leapt over another pothole, screeching as it landed.

The trees loomed high above, encircling and staring down at us like a crowd of people glued to a stage, eager to see what would happen next. They were always there, silently watching, waiting as my car spurted onward, gears twisting and grinding under the tremendous pressure I bestowed upon them, screaming like some suicidal phoenix racing to meet its final end.

Shadows leapt out from the darkness as we fled, snatching and tearing at Renee's soul with long, gnarled fingers. 'We just have to make it to the bridge,' I thought. 'Just make it to the bridge and we'll hit the pavement and be safe.' My car screeched and screamed at me to stop, banging and smashing in thunderous yelps as it tore itself apart; it couldn't go on, but it had to.

I turned over and looked at Renee while the wheel shook frantically in my hands, and I could see her fading. "Renee!" I said. "Renee! Just hold on a little longer! We're almost to the bridge." But I don't think she could hear me now, and when I looked up, I saw a glimpse of something in the woods. I didn't recognize it at first but felt I'd seen it before, and then I saw it again, swiftly running alongside

the car now, just shrouded behind the darkness of the forest. It was a wolf, a dire wolf.

I looked up and there it was, the bridge. We could make it, but there was something else I couldn't see. I turned to Renee one last time. "It's going to be okay," I said and could see the wolf still striding through the darkness, when suddenly it turned, and ran off into the dark. I looked up, but it was too late. I instinctively tried to turn, but once I started I couldn't stop, and my car slid, careening over the slope, roaring one last time as it fell.

When I came back around, I found the front end of my car consumed by the branches of a tree, and like weeds or maggots, they twisted and weaved through the front end. I looked to my left and saw a massive branch punched through the windshield and ran through Renee, who now lay draped across the dash.

"Oh shit," I muttered as I felt for the door handle. I pulled on it and fell out of the car into the snow below. I was

terrified. I quickly reached back inside and pulled the keys out, even though the engine was no longer running. “Shit man, shit!” I screamed, and my mind darted around, completely lost and confused. I reached back inside to check her pulse, but there was really no need. “Shit!” I said, yanking my hand back, unable to look at her. “Fucking hell, shit man!” Just a couple hours ago I had been laughing with Chippy and Kaiser and watching a show with her, but now she was dead and I was lost.

“Marcus,” a whisper said, but I was too scared to look. “Marcus!” It screamed. I looked over to Renee and one open eye now stared at me, deep into my soul, burning me from the inside out. I shuddered and fell backwards, crying. I knew it wasn’t truly her somehow, but it still pained me. “Why’d you leave me alone, leave me to die? Marcus? Marcus!”

I pulled at my hair as tears welled up in my eyes. “Shut up,” I said angrily, but it just continued on. I sat there crying as this voice, this thing, kept taunting me. I had nowhere to go, nowhere to run, and so I sat there and listened, and eventually it stopped.

I climbed back up to the road about thirty feet up the hill, slipping several times as I crawled on my hands and knees. When I got up, I could see the skids from where my car lost control, tearing down to the black earth through the layers of snow. I turned around and could see where it went over the edge, its tracks only picking up again about ten feet from where it stopped. It felt like my soul imploded or a black hole formed in my chest, the incomprehensible weight of a guilty conscience that pulled me down with the life of the innocent I eradicated.

I just sat there looking at it for some time until I heard a low growling sound come from around the corner of the road. I looked over and saw Kaiser's car with him driving slowly and cautiously my way, but there was a second person with him. I didn't know how to react. Was it good to see them, or was it bad that Jonathan came along, or was it both at the same time? And before the car even stopped, the passenger door flung open, and I was partially glad to see that it wasn't Jonathan.

"Oh, shit man! What fucking happened!" Chippy said as he ran out and over to me. "Are you okay?"

“Yeah, shit man! It’s Renee!” I said, pointing down to the car, its rear end sticking out like a tick buried into the skin of the forest.

Kaiser promptly got out and slammed his door shut. “Shit man, what the fuck did you do? Did you fucking black out again?”

“Renee’s dead man!” I yelled at him, and that shut him up, but his words cut deep. Did I black out? Just what exactly did I do?

Chippy cautiously climbed down and peeked inside, and when his eye met Renee’s, he jolted back, quite nearly falling over. “Oh, shit man, he’s right! Oh fuck, fuck! What the fuck are we going to do?”

“Shit man, I don’t know,” Kaiser said, fishing a cigarette out of his jacket and placing it in his mouth. “Fuck! I barely made it down here. How the fuck are we going to get your car out! Does it still run?”

“No!” I said. “It’s buried into the side of a fucking tree! Does it look like it can run?”

Kaiser looked at the car for a long second before he turned around and started walking back to his own. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get back to the house.”

“Wait,” I said. “But what about Renee?”

“Shit, I don’t know! There’s nothing we can do about that right now,” he said. “We can’t move the car and we can’t move her yet, so the only thing we can do is go back to the house.” He let out a large breath before his hand started nervously playing with his cigarette. “Look, we’ll come back in a bit,” he said. “Just lock your car for now, and we can come back down in an hour or something.”

“But what if someone sees it?” I said. “Sees her?”

“No one is going to,” He shouted. “There’s no one around for miles! Just lock up your car. This is fucking insane,” He said before getting inside and shutting his door.

The entire drive I sort of lulled in and out of consciousness while staring out the window. I had trouble trying to comprehend what happened, so I stopped trying to, and whenever Kaiser or Chippy asked me what happened, I would just say that I’d explain it when we got back. I just sat there, watching trees and snow pass by until I couldn’t

take it anymore, and stared at the floor with a sickening emptiness lingering in my gut. “How’d you find me so quickly?” I asked, jostling back and forth as the car rumbled on.

“Well, you didn’t exactly leave quietly,” Kaiser said with the unlit cigarette still dangling from his mouth. “Fuck!” He yelled while hitting the steering wheel with his hand. “Why didn’t you just fucking tell us man? We were still downstairs! We saw you leave!”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I panicked.”

When I saw the house again, I was filled with an overwhelming sense of dread, like if I were to go back inside, I may never come back out again. We parked the car in the garage and stumbled out, but before we went inside, Kaiser turned around and stopped the both of us.

“Look, don’t mention the acid guys,” he said, pulling the unlit cigarette out of his mouth for a second. “We never took any, and Marcus, you can tell them what happened, but just leave that out, okay?”

“Is that what you’re worried about right now?” I asked. “Because Renee’s dead, and Sjur’s gone too! I think there’s

more pressing issues than the acid right now," I said as he started walking up the front steps.

"Yeah, so don't bring it up then," He said before swinging the front door open.

Standing right there in the foyer was Jonathan, Erin, and Colin staring back at me, and when I saw their faces, everything that happened hit me like a ton of bricks and just came spilling out.

"Renee's dead," I mumbled out. "She's dead, and it's my fault."

"What?" Colin said, stunned like the rest of them. "What happened? Where is she?" He asked as Jonathan stepped closer, adopting his inspector persona once more.

"She got stuck in the shed. The door swung shut and she couldn't get out. I found her and tried taking her to the hospital, but my car lost control and spun out on the road. She's there."

Chippy walked over and pulled Erin to the side as Colin stood there processing everything for a moment. "Why didn't you wake us?" He finally said.

“I tried to!” I sputtered out. “But none of you would wake up, and I was freaking out and shit.” I thought to myself, ‘Jesus Christ, what have I done?’

Jonathan glanced from me to Kaiser, prompting him to disappear as he stepped forward. “Where is she now?”

“Down the road, near the bridge,” I said. “Car’s completely wrecked down the side of the hill.”

“That’s fine,” He said.

I stood there for a second, staring at him. I almost wanted to scream at him that it wasn’t fine, and it wasn’t going to be fine, but what good would that have done? I didn’t know what to think or feel. I felt angry. I felt enraged at myself. How could I have done this? Am I just deep down always going to hurt the people close to me? Was I meant to be alone? “I’m going upstairs,” I said before I quickly brushed past him into the kitchen. I grabbed one of the last wine bottles, went upstairs, and closed myself in my room for the rest of the day.

I locked the door and unscrewed the cap, gulping down half a glass worth in the span of a few seconds before I broke down and collapsed onto my bed. The acid’s effects hadn’t

subsided yet, and voices began nagging in the back of my head. The voice of my father, old highschool friends, and people I haven't seen in years, all telling me just how much of this was my fault.

Before long, the bottle was gone, leaving a dry metallic taste in my mouth that could only be washed away with more alcohol. I wanted more, and I wanted to scream at myself. 'Look at you,' I thought. 'Look at what a pitiful excuse you are for a person, not even a friend, not even a man. Can't even speak to others, much less open up to them,' and that just made me want to talk to the others even less.

I got up and looked out the window; an empty grove of snow surrounded by trees. Maybe I wouldn't ever get out of here. Maybe I didn't deserve to. Maybe I was fated to remain in these snow swept lands. I thought of myself as Barabbas, a monster, a fiend, an animal not worthy of thought or speech, not worthy of walking the earth. I looked at the desk and opened up the drawer. 'How much worse would it make me if I stole,' I thought. 'Can't get much worse. Go ahead and take it.' I snatched up the flask and flung off the lid, gulping down a hefty swig. I took

another and went to close the drawer, but noticed something that had been lying underneath. It was the flier Chippy and Erin made for the snowball fight. I picked it up and looked at it closely, but once memories started to return, I wanted to be rid of them, so I crumbled it up and tossed it into the trash can. I turned away, but something made me pick it up again and put it in my bag. I don't know what made me do that, or what made me crumble it up in the first place, but either way, it stayed like that.

I sat there, drinking the rest of Colin's flask as I looked around the room at his things: his snowboard, his bass, his nice clothes all laid out. What did I have? Nothing. I was nobody special; I didn't do anything special, and never would. And the more I looked around and thought of it, the more I realized just how little I was like everyone else. I didn't belong. I was an outsider, a bum.

I awoke to the sound of someone knocking loudly on my door. I must have dozed off for a couple hours as the sky outside was dim, overcast, and filled with a flood of snow. I didn't really want to answer it, but every time I thought they finally left, it'd pick up again.

“Fine, I’m coming,” I said, getting up as slowly as possible and unlocking the door.

“Where the hell have you been?” Kaiser spat as soon as the door opened.

“I’ve been in here. Why?” I said, quite taken aback.

“Well, get your fucking shit together, man. Cops will be up here in a few hours and we still have to move your car,” He said before abruptly leaving.

I threw on a new set of clothes and rinsed off my face before I went downstairs. It’s strange, but it felt like everything had slowed down suddenly, or just didn’t matter anymore. The act of buttoning my shirt, tying my shoes, putting on a belt, and washing my face all felt gruellingly tedious and dull. I didn’t want to do any of it, and if given the chance, I would have just continued lying there for who knows how long.

I went downstairs to find everyone running around in a frenzy, tidying things up and cleaning the place like they were expecting a visit from the dean himself.

“Where’s Kaiser?” I asked Colin as he ran past me with a garbage bag.

“He’s outside I think,” He said.

“What’s going on?”

“The cops are gonna be here soon.”

“Yeah, but why is everyone cleaning?” I said. “Isn’t there more important things?”

“I don’t know, maybe. But Kaiser’s outside,” He said, dashing away into the kitchen.

I went out and found Chippy, Erin, and Kaiser standing around Matt’s truck as fresh snow swept up around them.

“Come on,” Kaiser said once he saw me. “We don’t have all fucking day, let’s go.” opening the driver’s door and climbing in.

“This is so fucked dude,” Chippy muttered as he climbed inside.

The drive to my car reminded me of the drive Matt and I took during our first few days in the house, only like some nightmarish mirror of it this time. Storm clouds fully

obscured the sky and snowfall washed away everything that wasn't illuminated by the high beams. The entire drive, Kaiser spat and cursed under his breath, stomping his foot on the gas like a madman as the truck carved through the deepening snow around us. I never saw trees shake like they did then. The entire forest looked like it was thrown into a hurricane that would at any moment start ripping up trees and carry them far into the sky above.

When I saw the point where I lost control, and where the car landed, my heart sank into my stomach, and my mind overflowed with images of what lay inside. Her body had to be frozen solid at this point, and there was no way we were going to get her out of it. I feel like sad isn't a strong enough word to describe how I felt seeing that car again and knowing she was inside, dead… maybe heartbroken, but there was far more to it than that… it was agonizingly dismal, mortifying. When we stepped out of the truck, I could hardly even look at the car for longer than a few seconds before being overwhelmed by emotion and horror.

"You're going to have to put it in neutral," Kaiser yelled through the wind as he climbed down and hooked a chain under the backend of the car.

I wanted to protest, but it was my car. I cautiously walked to the driver's side door, and for just a second my eyes landed on Renee before they instinctively pulled back. She hadn't moved at all, but her skin was now as sickly pale as the snow itself, and her lips a deep gut wrenching blue.

"Come on, hurry it up," Kaiser shouted as the storm muffled and swallowed his words.

"Fucking shut up," I said, but like Kaiser's words, mine were carried away with the storm, only before he could hear them.

I pulled on the door handle and it cracked open, letting the wind blow into the car and toss Renee's hair around before it died down once more. As I looked at it wavering in the breeze, I recalled how she looked that morning, perfect, and looking at her now that all felt like eons ago, like I was a different person back then.

I threw the car into neutral and jumped out before my eyes glimpsed anything else again. Once I reached the top of the hill though, there was a loud rumbling sound that echoed from far down the road.

"Kaiser, do you hear that?" I asked.

“Yeah, yeah I do,” He said after a moment. He walked past me and looked down the road. “Has to be the police. Come on, let’s hurry this up.” He said, walking back to the truck and climbing inside.

I stood back and watched as Matt’s truck roared and jerked backwards, flinging snow and stones around in the storm as the backend of my car strained and buckled. I could hear the sounds of wood splitting and metal stretching as it slowly moved inch by inch. But as it moved, I could see the branch that went through the windshield was still intact, and as the car came closer it began pulling Renee up towards the windshield, and I could see her hair and pale hand and arm creep up to the glass.

“Shit, stop it! Stop!” I shouted, as Kaiser continued to pull, the sound of the glass cracking and breaking through as her stiff, lifeless arm suddenly lurched out. “Shit, shit! No, what the fuck are you doing!” I screamed, banging on the side of the truck until he finally put it back into park.

“What the hell are you yelling about now!” Kaiser shouted as he rolled down the window. “It’s already totaled! There’s no fixing it!”

“It’s not the goddamn car I care about!” I said in a bitter tone as the wind picked up again. “You’re pulling Renee through the windshield.”

He sighed and jumped back down out of the truck. He walked over in a sloshy trudge before he looked down at the car. “Fucking hell, fuck this!” He mumbled out as he walked over and unhooked the chain from the truck, letting it fall limply to the ground. He lifted his head up to say something, but before he could, there was a low buzzing, rumbling sound that echoed and crept up from the forest on the left-hand side. At first it was just a small sound, a sound I hardly noticed and thought I imagined until Kaiser noticed it as well.

“What’s that?” Chippy said as he finally opened his door.

“And what happened-” Erin started, but the sound grew over the past minute and by this point, it sounded just as loud as a distant thunderstorm. “What is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said as it continued to grow along with the snow and the wind. “It may be the cops making their way up here, but it’s too loud now.”

“An airplane maybe?” Chippy said.

“Maybe,” I said as I walked up closer to the truck.

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Kaiser said, turning back. “But let’s wait for them.”

“What?” Erin said as she peaked out Chippy’s door. “Wait for who?”

“The cops!” He said, climbing back up into the driver’s seat. “The car is wedged in there. It’s not getting out that easily.” He slammed the door shut and cranked on the heater. “We don’t have the equipment to get it out right now, and they might. Plus, this storm is getting worse and I don’t feel like standing out in it.”

I didn’t really want to, but decided to climb back into the truck with them. Over the next minute, that thunderous sound passed by and was replaced with the long ghastly wails of the wind. We sat there for a while, wondering if that sound may have been a snowplow or some other vehicle they were using to get up here, but soon ten minutes became twenty, then forty, and then an hour.

“Shit, where the hell are they?” I said as I tried to look through the fogged windows and the film of passing snow. “Didn’t you say they were going to be here soon?”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Kaiser said as he stared out the windshield, baffled. “Fucking hell, they should have been up here by now! Where the fuck are they?”

At this point, it was completely dark out, and there was so much snow falling that all you could see was the yellow light of the high beams reflected back. You couldn’t even see the forest that was a mere twenty feet away, and all around us the wind shook, rocking the lifted truck back and forth like a ship on the ocean.

“I’m driving back,” Kaiser said abruptly as he threw the truck in reverse.

Erin lurched forward from the back row and poked her head in the front of the truck. “Hey! Now wait a second, we-”

“We have waited a second!” Kaiser spat. “We’ve waited over an hour and they still aren’t here. It’s freezing out and we don’t have the equipment to move the car ourselves, so going back to the house until they get up here is the only option we’re left with!”

Erin was agasp. “What, so that’s it? We’re driving back to the house now? Renee’s in there! In that car! And-”

“And she’s dead!” Kaiser shouted back. “She’s dead okay! Moving the car isn’t going to change that.”

Erin turned to me, flabbergasted, waiting for me to say something, anything, but I didn’t know what to say, and thus said nothing. That’s not to say I didn’t want to. I did. I wanted to hit him. I wanted to take the wheel and turn us back around, but even if I did, what would that do? He was right, at least partially. We couldn’t get the car out now.

The entire drive back was exceedingly tense. No one wanted to say anything, no one even wanted to look at each other. The truck itself reminded me of one of those sensory deprivation tanks, the low sound of the wind and the truck and the entire lack of anything to look at except the constant falling of static snow.

That damn house. This damn snow. It seemed to me that the two had become the antithesis of misery and came to define all things abhorrent and unwelcoming. I wanted to see it burn down and melt all this snow away with it. Trying to leave it or escape became impossible, and like Sisyphus rolling his boulder to the top of the mountain only for it to fall down again, we returned to the house. It was insanity.

We parked out in front and slowly walked inside through the torrent of icy winds and blistering frost. Once we got inside, things hardly felt any better or warmer. It was dark, and frost hung from the corners and crept up from the windows, making the place look abandoned. I wandered around, with Chippy and Erin close behind me as Kaiser tramped down stairs. It was so dark and quiet that for a second we thought that maybe the others weren't even inside, that was until we found some of them in the dining room, picking at plates of roast and peas by candlelight.

"Where are they?" Colin said in an exhausted tone. "Didn't they come up with you?"

"No," I said. "We never saw them."

"Oh, figures," He replied as Jonathan picked a small piece of beef apart with his fork. "There's dinner if you want any, but it's tough and dried out," pushing away his own plate.

"What took you guys so long?" Jonathan said with a questioning bite as he lifted up a tiny piece of beef with his fork and placed it in his mouth.

"Have you taken a look outside?" I responded with a bite of my own.

“No need to be so hostile,” He said. “Was just wondering if you ran into any trouble.”

I walked over and sat down across from him while Chippy and Erin situated themselves at the far end. “So, what’s with the candles and everything?” I said.

“Power started flickering in and out while you guys were gone,” He said, leaning back and pulling out his pipe. “Figured it’d be a good idea to let the generator take a break for a bit. I’d suggest wearing your coat. It’s a little chilly in here.” He gave me the air of some old Victorian lord, or Nero, perfectly content watching from his marble palace as Rome burned to the ground, not caring if the flames swallowed him up as well. “Marcus? Are you alright?”

“What are you talking about?” I said, standing up.

“What?” He said, suddenly taken aback.

“Conserving power!” I shouted. “Renee froze to death. Sjur probably did too, and now you’re turning off the power? What, do you want to die too?”

“Marcus, we can still turn on the pow-”

“No, can you shut up for a fucking second! Two of us have died Jonathan, this isn’t a fucking house sitting job anymore!” I spat in teary-eyed rage. “We are snowed in. We are running low on food. Matt is sick and we haven’t seen the cops in over a week! What are you doing? You’re wearing your fucking winter coat inside! That’s how fucking cold it is in here! A little chilly? It’s fucking freezing, goddamn it!” I looked around the table and not only saw Sarah rise to leave, but Chippy and Erin as well. I stepped back for a second and caught my breath. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” I said, with tears streaming from my eyes before I collapsed back into my chair. “We’re fucking dying, all of us.”

That night, I had a hard time falling asleep again. Once more I was visited by the thing that crawled within my bed. Whenever I thought I was just going to fall asleep, it would lie down beside me and stretch a limb across my chest. I would wrench myself up, half expecting to see something, but always there was nothing there. And I’d stare around the room dazed, at Colin sleeping like a baby in his bed, seemingly untroubled. What was this? And why was it happening to me? I couldn’t stand it and began shifting in my bed anxiously. I just wanted to sleep, but I couldn’t, and

soon I gave up trying to. I went out to the bathroom, but before I could enter it, a sound caught my attention. It was music, coming from the piano downstairs, maddeningly fast and frantic.

I followed it and found Kaiser sitting at the piano in the parlor alone. His hands moved along the keys with swift precision, and yet with the jerking motions of a madman. And as the song reached its crescendo, he let his now unruly hair dangle in front of his eyes as his fingers jumped from key to key with frenzied and deranged passion.

“What is it?” he said in a bitter tone as he continued playing, his eyes meeting mine, crazed and wild. “Come to yell at me too?”

“No,” I said. “Just going to bed, actually.”

The next morning Chippy, Erin, and I spoke over cups of tea while the others slept and carried on their morning routines.

“Look man, I’m really sorry, but me and Erin are leaving as soon as the cops clear a path up here,” Chippy said while rubbing Remus’s head.

I looked at him and breathed a small sigh. “I mean, I don’t blame you,” I said. “I’d leave too if I could.”

“What do you mean, of course you can,” Erin said before taking a sip of her tea. It was talk like this that just hit a certain sore spot in me. Like I had anything or anyone to fall back on, like I had money, or somewhere to go. I had none of that. I had none of what they had. “I’m sure you can find someone to stay with,” she said nonchalantly, implying that this ‘someone’ was anyone other than them.

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, dismissing the idea all together. Over the past couple of weeks, the idea of going back to campus became a sort of fantasy to me, completely detached from reality, and now, not only was it a fantasy to me, it was practically impossible.

“Yeah, what about that friend of yours there,” Chippy said, snapping his fingers as he tried to remember, “Oh! You were going to stay with him over break.”

“Sam Koontz?” I said, surprised that he remembered something like that.

“Yeah!” He said. “What about him?”

“He’s in North Dakota,” I said, and he groaned. “Plus, I haven’t seen him in person in at least a year.” But the idea still stuck in the back of my head.

“Well, I would offer for you to stay with us, but we’ll probably end up going to Erin’s Aunt’s house,” he said, and I remembered what he said about her before: near daily trips to church service, the constant interrogations, not to mention the outlawing of the devils lettuce. “It’s not a real big place,” he added.

I sighed and looked out into the foyer and noticed June. “Yeah, no, I get that,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll figure something out.” I abruptly got up and left them there as I walked over to the foyer next to June. I don’t know why I hadn’t until then, but I never really spoke to her before. She gave me the air of someone whose nose was stuck in the clouds and would most likely never come down from there, but right now she didn’t seem that way. “Hey,” I said. “How’s Matt holding up?”

“Better,” she said as her eyes continued gazing at the small wooden elephants displayed within the grandfather clock. “But not good.”

“Oh,” I said. “And how are you doing?” catching her glance for a brief second before she turned back.

“Hanging in there,” she said, wrapping her arms around herself. “Just thinking about what’s going to happen when the cops get up here, and when Matt goes away.”

“You’re not going with him?” I asked.

“No,” she said, looking at me once more. “I can’t afford to. I have nowhere else to go.”

“Really?” I said. “Same.”

“Really?” she said in return. “Who would have thought that?”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Well, I don’t know,” she said. “Just figured you could. I mean, you own a BMW. That’s not exactly modest.”

“Owned,” I said. “And it was a 2002 I got from a family friend.”

“Still,” she said. “You just seemed like the well off type.” There was a long pause, and I thought about walking away until she said, “I’m sorry about Renee.” And unlike the others, she sounded genuine.

But before I could respond, we were interrupted by Colin entering the room, sipping on a cup of amber liquid. “Cops are finally here,” He said. “About fucking time if you ask me.”

Not only was it cops, though. Two large orange snowplows cleared a pathway for half a dozen other vehicles, including several large vans, a few patrol cars, and later an ambulance.

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered while looking out the front window. “They came through.” It felt like everything was finally over, that everything would be okay. I looked back at Colin as he took another sip from his glass. “What are you drinking?” I said. “It’s not whiskey, is it?”

“Apple cider vinegar, actually,” he said.

“Why on earth would you drink that?”

“I don’t know, I think it’s good for the immune system,” He said, taking another sip. “That and I’m trying to trick myself into thinking it’s alcoholic, but saying that kind of breaks the illusion.”

I was pleasantly surprised to see officer Nortan when I opened the door, though there was no sign of Keel. “Hmm,” He said in a gruff manner. “You’re still up here, are you?”

“Yeah, I mean it’s still winter break.”

“Hmm,” He said again. “Haven’t heard anything from Scott Hall, have you?”

“No,” I said.

“Figures,” He replied, welcoming himself into the house. “We’ve had a particularly hard time reaching him ourselves. Now, do you know anything about that car wrecked on the side of the road about a half mile from here? A gray BMW?”

“Yes,” I said in a nervous mutter as my heart sank. “It’s mine.”

“Oh, it is now!” he said as a twinkle of suspicion grew in his eye. “Well, son, I’m going to have to ask you some questions.”

“Alright,” I said. “Go ahead.”

“Well, I was thinking somewhere maybe a little more private, concerning the matter of the situation.”

“Everyone else here knows,” I said with a lump in my throat. “I’m assuming you’re talking about Renee, the girl inside,” pulling my gaze away from his smushed up face for a brief second.

“Yes, the young lady,” He said, taking out a notebook and licking his stumpy fingers. “When were you last with her?”

“I was with her when we crashed,” I coughed out. “And technically, I was with her after that too. When we tried moving the car.”

“And when was that?”

“We crashed around-” I started before something stopped me for a second. “Around six or seven in the morning yesterday.” I breathed in deeply before I continued. “And

we went back down to try and move it at about five or six in the afternoon."

"I see," he said while jotting down words into his notebook. "Now, do you mind telling me why you were driving with her at six in the morning yesterday?"

My mind suddenly went fuzzy as memories poured back. How beautiful she was, the sounds the car made as we skidded down the mountain, and what followed. "What?" I said.

He cleared his throat and looked at me quizzically. "I asked you-" He started again before he was interrupted by Chippy entering the room.

"I could speak to you if you'd like," He said suddenly.

"Well now, son, I'm speaking with him right now. So if you could leave us alone for a few minutes I'd be happy to talk to you after that," He said in an impatient tone.

"But, it's just I was there for most everything and-"

"Alright," Norton said, cutting him off. "I'll speak to you in a minute. Just let me finish with your friend here first."

Chippy looked like he was about to say something again, but I looked at him before he started and shook my head slightly, and he understood that I was fine. Norton questioned me for another five minutes or so, but he switched to Chippy once he found out that Renee and I were in something of a relationship, and how she suffered from severe hypothermia during her last moments.

“I’m sorry,” Norton said. “This must be very difficult for you. Rest assured, we’ll take good care of her,” he said, but I don’t think it helped. After all, what could they do now?

“Thanks,” I said, starting to leave into the kitchen as another officer assured me that they would find Sjur, but my doubts remained intact.

I hadn’t realized it while I was talking to officer Norton, but the house was now flooded with officers and members of the several search parties. Most came from Delilah Springs county, where the city of Hunting was, but there were others from Sunset, Ridge Water, Van Hauen, and even Copper Wheat county, which was a good three-hour drive from here. I stared out the window in the kitchen as a few more vehicles rolled down the driveway, and then I looked down at the little picture hanging above the sink. I

remember when I first noticed it I thought it had a certain old timey charm to it, but now it felt disjointed and out of place, and the more I looked at the faces of the children and the little dogs jumping up at them, the more it bothered me. Nothing stood out in particular, but it just seemed off, just lying in that uncanny valley between delightfully charming and nightmarishly twisted. I looked back up out the window and saw about thirty people standing in the front yard and around the porch, all chattering and yammering profusely. I swore I also saw a few reporters and cameramen weaving through the crowd, but I myself at least was never interviewed.

Several small groupings of them hung around the front porch and inside the house as the majority headed towards the forest or back down to my car. Groups would switch out every once in a while to take breaks and explain their findings, which were always null.

Apparently Chippy wasn't actually as enthusiastic to be asked questions as officer Norton and I may have thought. Within the span of a couple minutes, his answers dwindled down to single word responses accompanied by grunts and

incoherent mutters, after which he came over and spoke to me.

“Fucking hell,” he said, sitting down next to me in the kitchen.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Oh, just these fucking cops and their stupid questions,” he said, pulling his dab pen out inconspicuously.

“You really going to hit that right now with twenty cops standing around the place?” I said, lowering my voice.

“Who fucking cares. They have bigger fish to fry,” he said, hitting it and blowing out a thin wisp of smoke. “I’m fucking stressed out over here,” and he hit it again. “You think you can help me and Erin pack up our stuff? Might help get your mind off everything.”

I really didn’t want to, but at the same time, he did ask me. “Fine,” I said unenthusiastically, but I don’t think he even noticed, as he was already getting up from his seat to leave.

“Erin’s already started, but knowing her, she’s probably busy organizing clothes by color or something,” he said,

brushing past a group of officers as he started up the staircase. “I wouldn’t be surprised if nothing is actually packed yet.”

We found Erin in their room with several bags and cases laid out across the bed and the floor; piles of clothes and other various collections of objects strewn about in an OCD haze.

“See,” Chippy whispered to me as we walked in.

To be honest, it actually did help get my mind off of everything going on. We spent the next two hours packing their things and making small ventures back out to retrieve items before they were forgotten. For a while, in fact, we all forgot about everything going on, and it felt like those first days in the dorms again.

“Hey have you seen the charger for my phone?” Chippy said, lying lazily on top of the bed.

“I don’t know, maybe if you get up off your ass you’d find it,” I said jokingly.

“Uh! I’d never!” He said, holding his hand over his mouth before we both burst out laughing. He got out of the bed

and began looking around the room before he yelled out, “Smirnoff!” Holding up a small bottle of vodka. “You know what that means,” he said, shaking it as he grabbed a pink water bottle.

“Magic punch?” Erin said.

“Magic punch!” Chippy affirmed. “Yeah!” he said, pouring it out into the water bottle. “Bitch ass!”

“Is right now really a good time though,” Erin said as the last drops emptied into the bottle.

“Oh! Pfft! Come on, when is it not a good time for magic punch,” He said. “Plus, look how tiny the bottle is. We couldn’t get drunk if we wanted to,” and he quickly darted away to fill the bottle with water from the nearest tap. He soon returned and sprinkled in a couple packs of powdered punch before he sloshed the liquid around and took a sip. “Whoo wee!” he said, “Just as potent as ever,” and handed me the bottle.

Shortly thereafter, all of our phones buzzed and rang out, alerting us that yet another storm was on its way and reminding us that not everything was as fine as it then seemed. We finished packing things up and went back out

to find only a handful of police officers still hanging around. Most of them already left and, as I later found out, so did Matt. I didn't even say goodbye. In fact, I didn't say much of anything to him over those past few days, and I never saw him again.

None of us really felt like talking to one another, and once the final cops left, we all went our separate ways to bed for the night. Colin stayed up irritatingly late, trying to learn a riff from a Polyphia song before he finally gave up and went to bed around midnight. Though I was tired while he played, I now grew restless, and that restless spirit soon joined me. I could feel it crawling around and heard the bed strain from when it joined me. It would touch me on my shoulder or run its hand along my neck. I began to cry, because I started to realize exactly what it felt like, or who I should say. Those loud droning sounds returned too, but they shifted into something else, something tangible, something recognisable.

"Marcus?" she whispered.

'No,' I thought. 'No, stop it! You're not there, you're not here, you can't be. It's not possible.'

“Oh! Marcus, there you are!” she said in her sweet, flowery voice. “I was just wondering if you’d like to-” it continued before it shifted into something else, something dark and demonic, something I have trouble describing other than the fact that it terrified me. “die. Why aren’t you dead? Why didn’t you die? Marcus? Marcus! What are you doing! What is wrong with you!”

I shot up and saw it sitting in the corner of the room, staring at me. It wasn’t Renee. In fact, I don’t know what it was. It sat in an armchair, and wore a robe of some sort, but its face was elongated, almost doglike, and twisted into a hateful snarl as its eyes scanned me, feral and ravished by hunger. I had never seen anything like it in my life, and if it weren’t for the fact that I was able to move, I would have thought it to be sleep paralysis, but it wasn’t. It was something else.

I sat there staring at it for a solid five minutes until finally it faded back into the wall and left me. The strange thing about it was that the longer I looked at it, the less menacing it seemed to me. It seemed to have been lost or isolated, a part of me that I hadn’t seen in so long that it

now appeared monstrous, and the longer I avoided it, the longer it would starve and haunt me.

Six.

For once, the storm mostly blew past us. The roads still needed to be cleared, but by ten in the morning the cops and search parties made their way up to the house and Chippy and Erin were preparing to depart. I hated to see them go, but I wasn't going to try to stop them.

"Come on, Chippy, grab those bags already!" Erin called from the foyer as we enjoyed cups of hot cocoa.

"In a second, babe!" he called back before he turned to me and rolled his eyes. "Women, can't live with em, can't-" he said before he stopped himself and looked up at me. "Oh shit, I'm sorry, man. I'm a fucking idiot. I didn't mean it like that."

"No, no, it's fine, man," I said. "I knew you didn't."

"Yeah, no," He said, finishing his cup. "When this is all done and spring semester begins, we need to go out to the bars and forget about all this shit that's happened. It's hard to believe when remembering how it all started," He said, setting the mug down on the table and flashing a brief smile.

I really didn’t want to see him go, and I think part of me knew that things would only fall apart more when he left, but at the same time I couldn’t help but feel like he had to. He had a way of making people smile when they didn’t think they could, or making things just a bit more bearable, and I don’t know if he would still be able to do that if he stayed any longer.

“Come on, Chippy!” Yelled Erin one last time as she lugged the last set of cases out the door.

He looked one last time around the kitchen and took in a deep breath before his eyes shot to his feet. “Well buddy,” He said, lifting his head and outstretching his hand. “I’ll see you in a week, then.”

“Yeah,” I said, shaking his hand. “See you in a week.”

I watched from the front door as poor Clarence wobbled down the driveway, accompanied by an escort. It was a deeply depressing sight, because now I was left alone. I didn’t feel like there was anyone left I could really trust or feel comfortable around.

“So, they’re gone now, are they?” Colin said, joining me in the doorframe.

“Yeah,” I said as the car rounded the corner and disappeared around the treeline. “They’re gone.”

“Too bad,” he said. “I kinda like them. Come on, let’s go inside,” he said, closing the door behind him. “We should probably leave here soon, too.”

“What do you mean?” I said as he walked into the kitchen and poured himself a mug of cocoa.

“Well, the roads are cleared,” he said. “And we’re running low if not out on most everything, so we need to get groceries.”

And later that day, that’s exactly what we did. At first we contemplated taking down some of the others, but on second thought, none of them seemed particularly approachable. We both pulled into his car and rolled down to Leon, getting into town at about one in the afternoon. The town looked completely abandoned except for the window of the general goods store, where a neon blue Coors Light sign blinked.

The tiny bell at the door rang as we entered and everything seemed the same, but I couldn’t help but feel like it was all far colder than when we were last there. The colors of

things looked muted and faded, and everything looked sterile, lifeless. I opened the banking app on my phone to see how much money I had to work with, only to find a negative account balance.

“What are you getting?” Colin asked as he eyed the different shelves of wine.

“Ehh, I don’t think I really need anything,” I said with a following sigh.

“You don’t need anything?” He said in a shocked manner. “Alright, well suit yourself I guess,” grabbing a bottle of Apothic red. He stood there for another minute longer, looking at the bottles before he grabbed another red and asked, “I don’t know, you think I should grab a champagne? Or a riesling?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I usually go with a chardonnay.”

“Hmm, well, why not all three then,” he said, handing me the two reds while he grabbed the others.

We got some coffee and milk, along with several bags of other groceries, before we checked out and left. The lady behind the counter wasn’t the elderly woman I was used to

seeing. This time it was a pudgy, middle-aged woman who seemed as charming as a splinter and as enthusiastic as a doornail.

“Can I also get two packs of Turkish Royal blend Camels, the red ones?” Colin asked as she sat in her chair like a bullfrog, head down as she scanned each of the items.

“Come again?” she barked in a tin voice.

Colin sighed and started again. “Can I get a couple packs of the-”

“Need to see an ID,” she said, cutting him off rudely.

Colin handed her his ID and as soon as she finished ringing up, we paid and left. When we got back into the car, Colin let out a long sigh before he started it up. “What a fucking bitch,” he said before he threw the car in reverse and tore away. He pulled out one of the new cigarettes and lit it as we rolled out of Leon. “Shit,” he said. “Are there any dispos near here?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Let me check.” I pulled out my phone and started a Google search, only to find that the

nearest dispensary was about a twenty-minute drive from here, in a town named Cedar Falls.

When I told Colin, he immediately turned from the road leading to the house toward the dispensary. “Shouldn’t take more than an hour I’d say,” He said as

the car rumbled down the road. “I don’t really feel like seeing any of the others yet anyways.”

The ride was a long one, but not boring by any means. The entire drive Colin played a mix of jazz songs that at first I didn’t really enjoy, but once I started looking out the window and stopped thinking, it wasn’t too bad, and in fact, I grew to enjoy it. I watched as we passed by abandoned grain towers, cattle ranches, and gigantic wind turbines, all surrounded by endless waves of blank white snow.

“So why jazz?” I asked him as we sped by a collage of neglected buildings.

“Oh, I don’t know,” He said before hitting his cigarette. “I guess I started liking it when I was little and it’s just always stuck with me. Why? Do you want me to change it?” he said, reaching for his phone.

“Oh, no!” I said. “I actually kind of like it. I’ve just never met anyone who’s been so into it before.”

“Well, ever since I was little, I’ve listened to it,” he said, shifting the car down a gear as we neared the town. “My dad used to play it a lot, and though I don’t like to admit it, I guess that’s where my love for it came from. He was the one who got me started on the bass.”

I tried to think of some sort of response, but before I could, we arrived at the dispensary.

“Well, Imma run in,” Colin said, unbuckling his seat belt. “Be right back,” and he slammed the door shut.

I looked around the small town and enjoyed a cigarette while I waited for him. This town was far smaller than Leon, so small in fact that you didn’t have to walk far to see everything it had to offer. Most all the buildings here were in remarkable condition, and either resembled early 1900s houses that looked straight out of the New England countryside, or older rustic log style ones. All the houses with their quant peaked roofs and pastel colors dotted the road and crept up the mountainside that the town was built on. There was a fly-fishing shop, a couple diners and bars,

an inn, and a gas station with a conjoined convenience store; and by the time Colin got out of the dispo, I already walked the entire length of town and back.

“Ready to go?” He said as he climbed inside the car and started it up.

“Yeah,” I said as I looked at the snow and frost that had set into the deep scraps along the car’s surface. “Was just taking a look around for a bit.”

“Well, it probably didn’t take you very long,” he said with a chuckle as I slid into the passenger seat.

“So what did you get anyway?” I asked.

He showed me about an ounce worth of different assorted bud, a gram here, a quarter there, all with varying levels of THC and cannabinoids. He also got a brownie and a pack of gummy edibles that he planned on saving for the last couple of days there, so as to reduce smoking in the house.

“Really shouldn’t have smoked in there to begin with,” I said, looking over the various jars of potent contents.

“Yeah, well Jonathan said that he’s fine with tobacco as long as we air the house back out. And so as long as we

don’t smoke for the last couple days, I doubt he’d even notice the weed.”

We drove back up to the house, and due to the several cop cars and vans out front, we parked the car in the garage before we went inside. We saw Jonathan sitting in the parlor smoking his pipe and only a single cop hanging out around the kitchen, so we hurried upstairs to test the goods that we obtained.

“I don’t know about you, but I plan on trying a lot of this right now,” he said, opening the door to the bathroom. “I’d just rather smoke in here since there’s cops buzzing around and shit. Plus, there’s a fan.”

I joined him and flicked on the light before I closed and locked the door behind me. I took a seat on the toilet as he sat on the edge of the bathtub, opening the various jars of weed and selecting certain nuggets to grind up. Once he selected enough, he ground it up and started rolling a couple joints in a little roller.

“So, why are you still staying here?” I said as he finished rolling one.

“Well, same as everyone else, I assume. No where else to go,” He said as he put the joint in his mouth and lit it.

“Really?” I said, surprised. “You can’t get an apartment?”

“No. Why do you think I’m here?” he said, blowing out a small stream of smoke. “Have you seen how much it costs for a one-room apartment in Hunting? It’s outrageous.”

Of course I had seen the prices. One-room flats generally started at about $1500, and only went up from there. I was just surprised, shocked in fact that he was in the same boat as me. I took the joint from him and dragged off it before I handed it back and said, “Yeah, I’m just kinda surprised you can’t afford a place.”

“Why’s that?” he asked, squinting his eyes as he pulled off the joint.

“Well, I mean, it looks like your parents are pretty well off. I guess I just figured they’d be willing to help with something like that.”

“Well, they aren’t made of money,” he said. “And they don’t send me that much.”

‘Better than nothing,’ I thought as I took the joint again.

“If I could find a roommate, then maybe I could afford it. Maybe,” he said. “But it’d still be hard. I’d have to find a job and work while going to school, which isn’t ideal.”

I laughed. “Ideal,” I said. “I don’t know if anything’s ever been ideal.”

“Doesn’t have to be,” he said. “As long as we’re getting by, things are fine enough.” He sat there, puffing on the joint for a moment as he examined me closely. “You work at the gas station near campus, right? On the corner of fourteenth street?”

“Yeah, I did,” I said. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. I Just remembered, that’s all.”

I looked around as we continued smoking, at the clean white floor, at the white wainscoting, and the white light that made the smoke glow; it all felt terribly cold. I couldn’t help but shiver as a chill ran up my spine, taking another hit as the fan droned on.

We sat there for the next hour or more smoking and talking here and there, but most of the time we were quiet, just passing a joint back and forth till it burned out and he

rolled up another. At one point, I think maybe a half hour in, but I'm not too sure as we had been smoking a lot, we became less talkative and Colin pulled out his phone and started playing some music off it. I don't know who the music was by, but it was loud and chaotic, and completely unlike anything I heard before.

"Now her hair was as black as a bucket of tar, her skin as white as a cuttlefish bone. I left Texas to follow Lucinda, now I'll never see heaven or home."

It sounded like the long, drawn out tangents of some small town drunk, ranting about everything from worms to bankers, nails to women, and everything in between. We sat there smoking and listening to these poetic ramblings as the minutes ticked by. Neither of us spoke, and I sort of liked it that way. I didn't feel like saying anything, and I didn't feel I needed to.

After about another hour and who knows how much weed, we figured enough was enough and went out, shutting the door and lights behind us, but leaving the fan on. We started to make our way downstairs, but at the bottom sat Kaiser, who, upon noticing us, glanced back with a scowl before he turned and looked at the front door.

“Where the hell have you two been?”

“Smoking,” I said as we passed by him into the foyer.

“Is that all?” he said with a snide, incriminating tone to his words. “For over three hours? And you had to take a drive to do that?”

“What is it?” Colin snapped. “Or are you always bitchy?”

“I’m bitchy?” Kaiser said, lifting his head and staring him in the eye. “Where the hell have you guys been? I had to do like three interviews with news people while you guys were gone,” standing up and walking towards us.

“Is that all?” Colin scoffed as he continued to the kitchen. “We were smoking.”

“Is that all? What the fuck do you mean ‘is that all?’” following us in. “You guys were smoking for three hours? Is that all? Is that all you guys did? I know you guys were in the fucking bathroom together, so what were you guys doing? Please, elaborate.”

“What the fuck do you think we were doing?” I snapped, turning around to look at him. “If you wanted some help, you could’ve asked Jonathan or June.”

“Oh, fuck off! Really? Like I’m going to ask either of them for a damn thing!” He spat back. “And why are you getting all defensive all of a sudden? What, did I-”

“Can you just shut up!” I shouted. “What the fuck did I do to you?” I don’t know what kind of dirt he was trying to get on me, and I truly didn’t know what had set him off. Just four minutes ago I had been the most relaxed I’d been since Renee passed, and now my mind was a withering mess again, and Kaiser seemingly had it out for me. “Can you just leave me the fuck alone?” I said, uncontrollable vitriol spilling out through my words. “Just fuck off! Okay?”

“You know,” he said calmly enough. “I knew that Colin was a fag, but I never thought you were. I guess we each mourn in our own way.” He turned and stomped upstairs while Colin and I just stood there, stunned.

I couldn’t believe what I just heard, and neither could Colin.

“Wow,” Colin said before he stormed over to the staircase. “Why don’t you fucking piss off!” He shouted up, but not a word in response.

Colin and I spent the next hour together making some pork chops and green beans in the kitchen. He tried conversing with me when opportunities arose, but I myself was still agitated and didn't feel much like talking. In fact, I was so angry and feeling so many different emotions that anything, even the smallest, most insignificant thing, could set me off and cause me to burst out in curses. I just couldn't get past Kaiser's prodding and attitude towards me. It just caught me so off guard that I felt like at any moment he might burst into the kitchen and start questioning and yelling at me again. "Fucking hell! God damn it," I said, freeing my lanyard from the drawer knob it caught on. I resumed my walk and went to turn on the stove, only to find it wouldn't. "Fucking piece of shit!" I said, cranking it on again and again until finally Colin pointed out I was turning on the wrong burner.

The rest of the cooking followed in this manner, and once it was all finally done, we prepared the table. Colin started setting everything out, and I helped with napkins and silverware before I went to tell the others it was ready. I found Jonathan first, predictably, in the parlor, smoking his pipe as Remus laid on his lap, and Lady rested her head next to his feet.

“What is it?” he said in a quick, sharp manner as his hand jostled his pipe shakily. “Time for dinner?”

“Yeah,” I said, looking at his knee bouncing up and down as Remus somehow remained asleep atop it. “Yeah, it’s just ready now.”

“Oh, good,” he said, getting up abruptly, causing Remus to suddenly leap from his lap and Lady to rear her head up in surprise. “I’ll be right in. Just need to use the restroom first. You didn’t happen to tell Kaiser yet, did you?” he said, stopping for a moment in the doorframe.

“No,” was all I said.

“Oh, okay,” he replied, starting to leave. “Just wondering.”

Shortly thereafter, I found Sarah in the living space, reading. I walked up to tell her about dinner, but noticed something that made me stop. There, still fully on display, sat Erin’s unfinished painting, completely forgotten. The brushes were still out, matted and plastered with dried paint pressed through their bristles alongside several jars of paint, most closed, but some still open.

“Can I help you?” Sarah interrupted with a pretentious twang.

I turned and looked at her. “No,” I said. “Dinner’s ready,” and I left, but not before taking another look back at that abandoned landscape.

I went upstairs and quickly found June, sitting in her room where I found many of Renee’s things still laying out untouched. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, hunched over and back facing the door so I couldn’t see her face. I lightly knocked on the open door before I walked in, and she turned around. Her face was flushed and red, and tears streamed down her cheeks, though she tried to wipe them away.

“What’s the matter?” I said, rushing over and sitting down next to her. “What happened?”

“Oh,” she said in a guttural voice, like she had been stabbed in the stomach. “Everything! Everything Marcus, everything that’s happened. Renee and Sjur, and Matt, and… I don’t know, it’s just all so much,” she said, suddenly embracing me in a tearful exchange. “I’m sorry, it’s just all

been so much. I just can't stand it anymore. I hate it," she said. "I just don't want to watch another person go."

I wrapped my arms around her and held her close as I scanned the room: several bottles of Chanel, Dior, and Saint Laurent lined a shelf, an open box of postcards and pictures from France, a charcoal sketch of a man standing in a doorway; these were all Renee's things.

We stayed there for a minute longer before she followed me downstairs. I knew Kaiser was most likely still upstairs or in the game room, and thus went straight to the dining room.

Everyone was completely silent as we entered. I sat down next to Colin and he briefly glanced at June and then to me before he popped open a bottle of red. Jonathan was the first to start eating, carefully cutting his pork chop into tiny bites before he picked them up with his fork and gently placed them into his mouth. It was so quiet that I could hear his chewing from across the table. Soon, once Colin finished pouring a glass of wine, he started eating as well, and Sarah followed. I myself began playing with my fork, poking the pork and rolling and stacking and rolling my

green beans again around on my plate, but I didn't feel like eating them.

We sat there for a while in silence, picking at our meals until I heard a stomping coming from behind me in the kitchen, followed by a clattering of plates and dishes. I let out a long sigh, and before I was finished, Kaiser waltzed into the room, bearing a plate with a hefty stack of pork chops and beans. He flopped into a chair across from me before he picked up one of the chops and began eating it with his hands.

"Umm," he said, licking his lips obnoxiously before gulping down a glass of water. "A bit chewy, but-"

"Nobody asked," Colin said before he took a sip of wine.

Sarah set down her book for a second as she stood up, pushed in her chair, and picked up her things to leave, instinctively sensing the coming argument.

"Yeah, well, maybe you'll make it better next time," Kaiser said, snatching the bottle of wine from across the table and pouring himself a generous glass. "Then maybe I wouldn't say anything like the rest of you." He took a bite of his pork chop before he continued. "Hey! Maybe after dinner we

can all play a game together, huh? Maybe that will lighten your spirits. Maybe, liar-liar, or truth or dare, or-"

"Can you shut up," June said, exhausted.

"Yeah, maybe we all can just stand around silently moping all the time," He said, standing up and grabbing his plate. He muttered something under his breath before he turned and left, storming back down stairs like a kid being sent to their room for the night.

"Fucking prick," Colin muttered, pouring himself another glass of wine while the rest of us sat silently.

I would like to say that for the last few days everything went fairly smoothly, and we all went back to UJR for spring semester in the end. But that's not what happened, not even close. The next couple days followed like this one, Colin and I dodging Kaiser as often as we could, and when we couldn't, a brief spat and nothing more. But this couldn't continue forever. Something seemed to have changed in Kaiser after Renee's death. At the time, I figured he was just going through the same feelings as us: loss, confusion, depression, but that wasn't it. He acted volatile, angry, enraged, and hateful towards all of us, but

especially myself, which confused me as he'd been quite friendly to me before. I couldn't help but feel responsible for what happened, and I think he thought the same.

The last day I spent in that house stretched and dripped by like a long sticky tap of molasses. It really wasn't my last day, but the day before, but a lack of sleep mixed with insomnia, addled by a strong strain of indica has a way of blending days together in a confusing manner so that one doesn't recognize when one day has passed and another begun until long after the fact. In fact, I have a hard time saying that it was the day before, as a confused and disoriented mind has a way of forgetting facts that aren't immediately ready, and dropping details that aren't readily needed, and so, I can only write things as I remember them.

After a particularly long smoke sesh with Colin, I was sitting in the living room around mid day just staring at Erin's unfinished painting of the house. I hated it. Not the

painting that is, but what the painting represented to me. It was pure agony. I'd rip my eyes from it, only to realize that I was in fact within that very house, and then I'd turn back to see how she envisioned it. Her strokes weren't realistic, but instead they were depicting how she felt about the house, how it made her feel. It was then that I understood how she was able to paint like that. She wasn't painting what was seen, but what was felt.

I got up and looked it over more carefully, picking up one of the brushes and feeling the bristles between my fingertips. I opened a jar of paint out of curiosity and found that it was still usable. I didn't even stop to think if she would have minded; she had left it, after all. At first I started with simple, small, modist strokes, filling in what she left unfinished before my mind and my own creativity took over, reenvisioning the piece as my own on top of hers.

Time stood still while I carefully filled in details and whipped mad strokes across the canvas; as to me, the more raw and violent they seemed, the more accurate they were. Erin couldn't sit long with a project, but I was the opposite, I wouldn't rest until it was finished. She used a lot of

expressive colors in what she painted, but I used mainly dark ones, the only bright thing being a sinister blood red that cast everything in the light of a Beksinski nightmare.

“What are you doing?” Jonathan said, walking into the room with a cup of coffee.

“Finishing this,” I said, keeping my gaze on the painting.

He walked over and stood next to me for a moment as he looked at the painting closely. “Why?” he finally said.

I turned and looked at him and could tell that he was unsettled, and that it possibly concerned him, or at the very least, he didn’t enjoy it. “Why what?” I responded.

“Why are you finishing it?”

“Why not?” I said, putting in the last of the strokes.

He looked at it again, took a sip of coffee, sighed, and turned to walk away. He stopped at the doorway though and took another sip of his coffee before saying, “We should get out of this house,” and turned back to me.

“What do you mean?”

“Just a drive,” he said. “Get some fresh air. If you want, we could leave in about a half hour.”

“How?” I said. “You don’t have a car, and I don’t have one anymore either.”

“Well, I’m sure Colin would want to get out as well. If he’s not in the kitchen, he’s upstairs smoking. And if he doesn’t, I’m sure I can borrow Kaiser’s car.”

His confidence in that fact astounded me. ‘With, or without Kaiser’s permission?’ is the question that came to mind. But as it turned out, there was no need for that question. Colin jumped at the opportunity to leave at a second’s notice, and within five minutes of us asking him we were pulling out of the driveway.

For the first hour or so, we just drove around, nowhere in particular. I watched as trees and snow covered houses passed by the window. Long stretches of farmland passed like white waves littered with abandoned farm equipment. The fresh air did make me feel better, and after a while I was living in the moment again, not lingering on the past.

“So, what do you want to do?” Colin finally said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Nothing right now.”

“Well, I know some people who will be throwing a party tonight,” Jonathan said from the back seat. “If you want, we can go there.”

“Where’s it at,” Colin asked.

“It’s in Hunting, but not for another four hours or more.”

“Alright,” Colin said. “In the meantime, is there anything you want to go do?”

“Just drive,” I said, watching the trees fly past.

We stopped in Leon for an early dinner at The Elkhorn and filled up the tank with gas before we set out for Hunting and Jonathan’s mysterious party. It was strange, but the further we got from the house and Leon, the more comfortable and relaxed I became, and eventually I even dozed off for a bit. I nodded in and out, catching a few words between Colin and Jonathan before I drifted back to sleep, my head bumping against the glass as we rumbled onward.

I only awoke briefly before we arrived at this house party, and by then it was already dark out. It wasn’t far from

campus, maybe a five-minute walk, and by now there was already a line stretching from the front door down to nearly the end of the block. As it turned out, this was the fraternity house of Delta Rho Iota, and just how Jonathan knew them I didn't know, but they seemed to admire him.

We parked a couple of blocks down and quickly passed the ever-growing line of people waiting in the freezing cold for their chance to get inside.

"You're not getting in," one guy in a Patagonia jacket said as we walked past, and it was echoed by another extremely drunk fellow who had trouble standing.

"What the fuck," Colin whispered as we followed behind Jonathan. "Just how big is this party?"

As we neared, we saw just how big it was. The house boomed with the sounds of trap and EDM music as people crowded around the front porch, begging to get inside. A student stood over the railing of the porch, ralphing his brains out into the snow below as another kept trying to hand him a drink. As we walked up the steps, a few guys tried shoving us back, spitting and yelling incoherently before the door opened and a group of girls dressed in

nothing but white robes ran out barefoot, down the steps, and across the street. ‘Jesus christ,’ I thought. ‘What the hell is going on here?’ I had been to a few parties while in college, but never a frat party.

“We’re full,” a jacked guy standing at the door said before Jonathan leaned forward.

“I was personally invited by Carson,” He shouted over the music. “Carson McNay.”

The bouncer guy stood back, shocked, before he went inside, leaving us on the porch with a buddy of his for a couple minutes before he returned and let us in. We entered into a world of beer pong, shotgunning, bongs, and nonstop partying. All the furniture in the house was pushed to the walls to maximize occupancy, which was indeed maximized. All around the house were candles, set out in groups of three: one black, one white, and one gold. Black Beatles crept up through the floorboards, floating and buzzing in my ears as we pushed through shoulder to shoulder. Before we made it even ten feet inside, we found it not only important, but necessary to grab a drink. I myself started with a glass bottle of Mike’s lemonade, but Colin made the mistake of grabbing a Whiteclaw.

“Hey!” some frat boy wearing a ratty tank top said to him. “That’s a bitch drink! You can’t drink that.”

But Colin cracked it open before he could realize the other guy was talking to him. “What?” he said, only now realizing.

“You can’t just drink that!” the guy said. “Chug it, chug it! Chug it!” and soon an entire chorus of frat boys joined in.

As this was going on, I saw Jonathan grab a PBR before someone grabbed him on the shoulder. “Johnny boy!” the guy said. I noticed that upon his forehead was the alchemical symbol for lead, Saturn, and on his left hand was the squaring of the circle, or the philosopher’s stone. “You made it. Come on, we’re just starting!” he said before dragging him upstairs through the crowd of cheering bodies.

When I looked back at Colin, he had already finished his drink and was opening a second as he got sucked into the mass of partiers and ragers, and I melted into the background. I wandered aimlessly through the house, sipping at my drink as countless people bumped and shoved into me.

“Greg! Greg!” a girl shouted at me as I wormed through a tight hallway and she finally realized I was, in fact, not Greg.

I managed to make my way into the kitchen, where the center attraction was a game of beer pong that took up nearly the entire floor-space. The cups on the table and the old chandelier above shook wildly from the bass that thumped in the basement, deafening upstairs and undoubtedly ear-splitting below. Two greenies stood in one corner trying to roll a blunt as a girl sat precariously on the edge of the counter next to them, nearly falling over every couple of seconds. At least a dozen people sat on the counters around the table, some on others’ laps, and a few leaned up against cabinets for strength, already on the verge of blacking out.

“Let’s go!” a tall jock at one end screamed, pumping his fist in the air as the other team removed two cups and tossed the balls back.

“Yo yo, I got next game!” A guy with curly hair said next to me as I finished my drink. “Yo, what’s your name?” he said, tapping my arm with the back of his hand.

“Marcus,” I said, over a sudden roar of applause.

“Marcus? Well, I’m Chase,” he said, shaking my hand. “You wanna team with me next game?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, grabbing a Natty Light.

I joined this stranger, Chase, in the next game where we went up against the team of still cheering jocks. It started well enough, and we cleared five cups within the first couple minutes, but soon the crowd shifted out of the kitchen as the energy moved downstairs. We entered a dry period as the other team continued racking up cups and by this time only a few barely conscious stragglers were left in the room. I quickly lost interest, and once we lost, I grabbed a fresh brew and made my way downstairs to see what was going on.

The entire staircase leading down was packed, tens of people all crammed together like sardines as loud, erratic music built from deep within the house’s heart. The lone light in the basement, a strobe, cast everything in a disorientating, rigid light as an entire ocean of jumping and cheering students blinked rapidly in and out of existence. Scraping synths and thunderous bass drops rocked the

entire house from a small set at the far end. I don’t know how long I was down there, raving and screaming along with the others like it was some sort of hedonistic occult ritual, but I got lost in the madness of the crowd. Everything faded away as I wandered through them, jostling my head back and forth as my body shoved around, ears splitting and nose stinging with the smell of sweat, beer, vomit, and drugs. Faces of rage, of greed, lust, and anguish washed past me, once pure, now corrupt. Saliva sprayed, breathes heaved, and sinew shook as I lulled through hell; I didn’t want to leave, I wanted to stay and get drowned out in that chaos.

At about two, the music went quiet. Upstairs, the frat was arguing with city cops called to shut the party down. A couple of students even got picked up during the hassle, and within the matter of a couple minutes everyone was scrambling to get out of the basement as cops suddenly rushed into the house. I ran out the back door with about twenty other students and jumped the fence. I ran for half a block before I turned a corner and started walking back in the direction I came in an inconspicuous manner. I pulled my pea coat around myself and walked right up to the front of the house. Snow was just beginning to fall again and I

could see an officer pulling one especially rowdy guy into his car, kicking and screaming as he clutched a beer he refused to surrender.

It was hard for me to comprehend what exactly was going on, but either way, I knew I should keep my distance and remain invisible until I could find Colin and Jonathan. A group of fraters started screaming from the third floor window, spitting and throwing cans as their brothers in arms were detained. I couldn't see Colin or Jonathan, and after ten minutes, most everyone cleared out, and I started to get worried. I pulled out my phone to see if either tried calling me, but realized that we never exchanged numbers over the entire time we'd been together. And so, with little alternative, I began walking back to where I remembered the car being parked.

I walked the blocks while listening to the sounds of police sirens and angry students cursing the system, watching as flakes skidded and danced into the light of street lamps before they fluttered out and into obscurity. In the distance I could see Colin's fiery orange, and beside it stood Jonathan, casually smoking a cigarette that he stamped out as I got closer.

“Is Colin not with you?” he asked as I walked up.

“No,” I said. “You haven’t seen him?”

“No, I thought he was with you,” he said in an agitated tone. “When did you see him last?”

“About the same time you left,” I said, fishing a pack of nicotine pouches out of my pocket. “I haven’t seen him at all since then,” opening the pack up and putting one in my mouth. “I don’t know if he stayed at the party, if he left somewhere, or got caught up with those cops… do you have his number or something?”

“Yeah, yeah I do,” he said, pulling out his phone. “He tried calling me about an hour ago,” and from the way he held his phone, I could see that wasn’t the only call he missed. He swiped away the other notifications before he clicked on Colin’s and held it out on speaker mode. It rang for an agonizing half a minute before it went to voicemail, and Jonathan switched it back from speaker mode and turned around.

“Where are you? Marcus and I are waiting at your car. Get over here!” he said before hanging up and putting the phone back into his pocket.

“No answer?”

“No, and it’s two o’clock in the morning. Where the hell is he?”

We stood around the car for another twenty minutes, kicking snow while constantly checking our phones and looking down the street to see if he was coming, which, of course, he never was. At one point, a group of students walked towards us, and one among them looked shockingly similar to Colin.

“Colin! Colin!” I shouted, waving my hands to get his attention.

The figure squinted at me for a second before he cupped his hands and shouted back. “I’m not fucking Colin,” and started laughing with his buddies.

Jonathan didn’t find it funny, and I myself was starting to get pissed off by the whole situation, and it wasn’t long before we both started heading back to the frat house, fuming as Colin was off doing god knows what. I was freezing my ass off and forgot to bring gloves. If only I had Colin’s snapchat, I’d be able to find him by using his location, but I didn’t.

When we walked back up to the house, the cops had already left and most everyone cleared out. A few half dead looking students still clung to the front porch railing and the doorframe, but the music quieted and the house was now, mostly, still.

“You think he’s still here?” I asked as we walked up the steps once again.

“I don’t know, but for some reason I doubt it,” Jonathan replied before he welcomed himself back inside the house.

I went to follow him, but the guy leaning against the doorframe suddenly perked up and blocked the entrance with his arm. “No more people are allowed in,” he said, looking at me with glassy eyes. “We’re full.”

I stared at him for a moment like he was a complete idiot, and he looked at me the same. Did he not just see Jonathan walk in two seconds ago? “Uhh, that was just my friend,” I said, pointing in the direction Jonathan walked.

“We’re full,” he repeated, rolling a hard liquor fog off his words. “You’re not getting inside.”

I thought about making another excuse, but instead I just turned around slowly, acting as if I had nowhere else to go, which was true. “Well, I’m just going to stand out here and wait for a bit then,” I said, leaning on the railing and looking out towards the campus. ‘Now,’ I thought. ‘Where the fuck is Colin?’

After about five minutes, the guy guarding the front door went back inside, and I slipped in before the door shut. The house now only had about thirty people in it, and most of them hung around the ground floor and the staircase. One guy laid back on a La-Z-Boy chair, passed out with a half drank beer resting precariously in his hand as another guy sat on the arm of the chair, rocking back and forth and chatting with two girls who joshed with him from a fireplace. One of them noticed me standing there awkwardly, and while I was searching around the room, they offered me a drink.

“Thanks,” I said, cracking it open and taking a swig. I hadn’t realized till then how much I drank that night, and like a scale this one tipped me over the edge, plummeting down at an exceeding rate, so fast and sudden that it felt

like poisoning. “I think I need to sit down,” I said, grabbing a chair and pulling it beneath me right before I fell.

“You okay?” she said, looking at me behind a thin veil of black hair.

My mind began spinning. I felt nauseous as everything suddenly blurred and I only vaguely remembered where I was. I looked up at the person who spoke to me and was startled to see someone who looked remarkably similar to Renee. She had the same dark hair, the same pursed lips, the same deep comforting eyes. “Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, taking another swig of my drink.

She turned back and continued chatting with the guy who sat on the arm of the La-Z-Boy, but I continued to look at her. She didn’t look exactly like Renee, but there were so many pieces of Renee I could see in her, the way she held herself and the tone she spoke in. I sat there studying her, and it almost felt like I was back with Renee again before I realized I was staring at a complete stranger. I took another sip of my drink and, realizing where I was, got up and started searching the house for Jonathan and Colin.

A film of drunkenness and sleep deprivation blurred my mind and fogged my vision, sometimes causing strange sensations of déjà vu or bouts of memory loss. It's like the environment would shift around me; right when I got used to it, the stairs were suddenly somewhere else, or a door disappeared. It was like one of those terrible dreams where this time I was searching for Jonathan and Colin, and could find anyone but them.

I ran into an old friend of mine from CRU, Kyle, who I didn't know transferred to UJR, and he similarly didn't know I had. I chatted with him briefly, but before we could really catch up, someone pulled him away into another room. I also oddly enough bumped into a teacher from my first semester here, a Professor Howard Lowe. He taught my intro to philosophy class, and unfortunately I never had the opportunity to take a class with him again. This truly was unfortunate to me, because he really was a fascinating teacher, and I loved philosophy. I found him sitting in the basement, smoking a blunt with the fraters while telling them tales of Diogenes, Cicero, and his years of study at Braxton Tenith down in Louisiana. In the corner of the basement, one overly drunk student started puking, but in the words of this wise man, "Who hasn't been in that lad's

shoes before?” I don’t know if I was surprised by this scene or laughed at its predictability, as in his case, they were two sides of the same coin. I stayed awhile, drinking warm beer while listening to his elaborate tales of beggars and kings before something carried my attention elsewhere, and I disappeared from him.

I wandered around the house for a while longer until right after I thought I searched the entire upstairs and thus came back down, Jonathan likewise walked down. “Come on,” he said, throwing his coat on and heading outside. “I just got a phone call from Colin.”

“Really? Where is he? What’d he say?” trying to keep up with him.

“I don’t know. I missed it,” he replied, already down the front porch steps. He stopped just before his feet touched the sidewalk and pulled out his phone. “I’m gonna call him back,” he said, pushing on Colin’s number and holding the phone up on speaker.

It rang for almost twenty seconds, buzzing with the wind that gnawed the warmth from my hands until Colin finally picked up.

“Hellou?” he mumbled out over the sound of screaming students.

“Colin?” I said. His voice was so slurred and scratchy that I had a hard time telling if it was him or not.

“Colin, where the hell are you? It’s nearly four o'clock in the morning and we have to get back to the house still,” Jonathan said, beginning to walk back to the car.

“Wha?” Colin rolled out. “Itta hard toer you.”

“What did he say?” I asked. “He sounds blacked out.”

“Colin, Colin!” Jonathan repeated, holding the phone closer to his face and cupping the microphone. “Where are you?”

There was a notable gagging sound in the background before Colin said, “I’m nata guy’s house,” and groaned.

“Yeah, but where is that?” I asked, as the lights of a car lit up the street. “What’s the address?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line as the car whooshed past us down the road, spraying slush and gray water up onto the curb and my shoes. There was some

muffled mumbling before Colin finally spoke up and said, “I’m at a hunded turdy fur, tenny first street.”

Jonathan looked at me and sighed in an unamused manner, and I took the phone from him. “Can you repeat that?” I asked as Jonathan pulled out a cigarette and lit it up.

Another irritatingly long pause. “What?” Colin squawked, as if he didn’t understand the question. “When’re you bein here?”

“Jesus Christ,” Jonathan said, taking the phone back; He must have drank quite a bit too as he now looked it, and swore more than all the time I had previously known him. “Colin, what’s the fucking address of the place you are at! Come on, spit it out, we’ll pick you up.”

“Wha-” Colin started before something cut him off briefly. “I…just, think it’s maive been not an that far, just und bit. It’s on… twendy furs stree, north. I’ll be outsi-” and the beep of an ended call came through the speaker.

“What the… god fucking…” Jonathan cursed as he shoved his phone back into his pocket. “Great, twenty-first street north. Now, where are we?”

As it turned out, not too far away. It was about a ten-minute walk from the house, but we ended up jogging a good deal of the way and made it there in about six. More than once my drunken legs sloshed on the ice and sent me falling to the ground, bruising a muscle that I wouldn't notice until the morning, or long after. We walked past several intoxicated squadrons of students and a rabble of rowdy partiers returning back to the dorms after a long night on the town.

"Fuck the papers and the tests!" One guy said to another as we strolled past. "We're here to live!"

I don't know why such a forgettable line stuck with me for the rest of the walk and until now. I probably heard it or its equivalent a dozen times or more while I was at UJR, and would hear it many more after but something about its wording, it's premise reminded me of when we first got to the Dean's house, how happy we all were, and how we were just grateful to live there until Sjur disappeared.

At first when we reached twenty-first street, we were at a loss. We didn't know which house he was at and didn't remember exactly what he said because most of it was unintelligible, but halfway through debating whether we

should each go one way or search together, I noticed one especially drunk fellow stumbling his way down the sidewalk away from us. He didn't look like he knew where he was going, or what he was doing for that matter, and just aimlessly swung his feet out in front of himself, curious to see where they may take him. As it turned out, this person was in fact Colin, and we found this out due to the fact he was walking so slowly and drunkenly it took us maybe twenty seconds to catch up to him.

"Oh!" He said, nearly jumping out of his skin as he scanned us over with loose eyes. "You made it. Now, whereza car?"

"We didn't bring the car," I said, pointing to the lanyard sticking out of his pocket. "You have the keys."

Getting Colin to follow us back turned out to be a much easier task than finding him. He was nearly blacked out, but not quite. Shreds of consciousness still remained, but the majority of the time he was in an alcoholic trance, just blindly following whatever we told him like some magician's hypnotized sidekick.

I took the keys from him, and for a moment sat down in the driver's seat and put the car into drive. I looked out the

windshield as a fresh blanket of snow started falling from the sky down onto the dark gray pavement. Some flakes clumped together into small white piles, but most disappeared into the sidewalk or road, never to be seen again. Where did Sjur go? Why did he just have to disappear like that? Not a trace, a path, a clue or anything to tell us where he went. He was just gone. “I don’t think I should drive right now,” I said, putting the car back into park before I opened the door to get out.

“Drink too much?” Jonathan asked, opening the passenger door to trade places.

“You could say that. Just not feeling good, I guess.”

“Here, do you want any?” He said, offering me his silver coke case as casually as a stick of gum. “Usually sobers me up pretty quick.”

“No thanks,” I said, slouching down into the passenger seat. “Don’t really feel like sobering up just yet.”

“Alright,” he said, tucking it back into his coat pocket. “Suit yourself.”

He pulled away from the curb and I watched as the snow continued to fall, wishing that it could just go away long enough for us to breathe and all this to pass by, but it wouldn't, not yet.

"You know," I said, turning away from the mounds of snow. "I've been thinking about what you asked. About going to Germany."

"Oh, that?" He said, surprised I remembered.

"Yeah, I think I'd like to go. It sounds nice."

"Yeah, well, I probably won't be going until the summer," he said, turning past a park full of drunken students. "And I think I'll want to stay there awhile. Maybe even until fall semester."

"Yeah," I said, chuckling. "Fall semester. Hell, it's hard for me to even see myself going back this spring after everything that's happened."

"How are you holding up?"

"Fine enough I guess."

"…Are you sure?"

“No,” I said, first as a joke, but it lingered in sincerity. I saw a truck roll by, its high beams blinding in the night, and for a brief moment I thought of my mother and my last memory of her before she passed. “No, it’s all just hard to live with. Everything that’s happened, Renee. It’s my fault, it’s my fault she’s dead.” A long uncomfortable silence lay between us as Colin mumbled something in the back and Jonathan eyed me silently from the driver’s seat. “Sometimes I doubt I can continue to live, or even deserve to.”

“Don’t say that,” he said suddenly. “Don’t even think about that. It’s a stupid and selfish thing,” he said bitterly. “As soon as you make that a possibility, it’ll become reality. No one can name the end of their story until it’s finished, until you’re finished. And you’re not. You’re far too young for that.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t trying to imply that I’d kill myself, but that’s what he thought I meant. It wasn’t my intention to make it seem like that was a possibility, and yet I needed to hear what he said all the same.

We sat silent for the rest of the drive home. A few times I thought about resparking some conversation between us

but nothing could replace the conversation from before, like there was some agreement or mutual understanding brokered between us. It was the opposite of an agitating awkward silence; this was an oddly soothing type, aided by the gentle rumble of the Camaro's engine and only occasionally interrupted by Colin, drunkenly mumbling in his sleep from the back seat. I leaned back and looked out the window as we drove on through the night. Tiny snowflakes blew past like many shooting stars and I wondered if Dean Hall was on his way back to Montana yet before I drifted off.

I awoke as we rolled down the driveway. I don't know if Jonathan had stopped on the way up or just took his time, but I was surprised to see the light of the sun had just started to peak up, and that it was now half-past five in the morning. Jonathan pulled the car up to the front door and put it in park, letting the engine idle as the doors unlocked.

“Shit, we back already?” Colin groaned, trying to open his eyes and look around but unable to. “Ugh, my head feels like crap.”

I opened the door and got out, stretching for a moment as Colin clambered out behind me, crawling on all fours before he tumbled out of the car into a snowbank.

“Jesus Christ, man, are you okay?” I said, helping him up as one of his feet slid, putting him into an awkward split stance.

“Yeah, just haven’t got me sea legs yet,” he joked in a sailor accent before ascending the front steps, jostling back and forth on the railing.

I opened the door, and he slid inside, stumbling across the foyer floor right into the grandfather clock, nearly knocking it over. “Fuck man, come on,” I said, grabbing the clock as it teetered on its edge. “You need to sit down,” pushing the clock upright and showing him to the living space. “Here,” I said, helping him onto the couch. “I’m going to go make some coffee. I’ll be right back.”

I laid him down and went into the kitchen, but within a minute there was a heavy thump, followed by a loud, “Ow! Fuck!”

“What happened?” I called, bag of coffee grounds in hand.

“Hit my head!”

“On what?”

“... I don’t know,” he called out before stumbling back into the foyer.

I continued making the coffee as he wandered around for a few minutes, looking at the paintings and fixing the little elephants that had been knocked over inside the grandfather clock. As he was doing this, I could hear Jonathan put the car back into drive and bring it round back to the garage, it wasn’t a very quiet vehicle, before he parked it inside, and came in through the screen door a minute later.

“Here,” he said, handing me Colin’s keys. “I parked it inside the garage for now.”

“Alright,” I said. “Do you want any coffee? It’ll be done here in a minute.”

“Sure,” He said, sitting down before there was another audible tumbling sound, this time coming from the staircase.

“I’m alright!” Colin shouted before either of us even figured out what the sound was. Apparently, he tried climbing the stairs and fell down a couple of steps before he caught himself again.

“What are you doing?” I said, walking out into the foyer. “You’re going to kill yourself.”

“I don’t know, I think I just need to lie down for a minute,” He said, swaying back and forth as one hand gripped the railing for dear life.

“Here, let me help you,” I said, hanging his keys on a hook before I followed up behind him. I carried him to our room and laid him down on his bed. “Need anything?” I asked, and he didn’t reply, but as I turned to leave, he reached out and grabbed my arm. I turned around, and he looked me in the eye with his own still loose and glazed. “What is it?” I said, confused, but when he opened his mouth to say something, nothing came out. His grip soon loosened as his arm dropped down and he rolled over, muttering

something incoherently. I left, telling him his keys were on a hook in the foyer, but like before, he said nothing.

I went back into the kitchen and poured out two cups of coffee, handing one to Jonathan before I sat down next to him.

“Is he okay?” he asked, while cautiously sipping at his mug.

“Yeah, he’s just plastered still,” I said, taking a sip of my own. “He’ll probably pass out here soon.”

Jonathan laughed and took another sip of his drink. “Yeah, well, I’ll probably do the same within the next hour,” he said, but as he continued, I could hear footsteps coming from the staircase. At first I thought it might be Colin coming back downstairs, but within a few moments I saw Kaiser’s hair, then his head rise from the basement until he stood in the foyer with Jonathan’s back still turned to him. “You know,” Jonathan said. “For a while, I thought we weren’t going to find him.”

“Find who?” Kaiser said with little indignation as he walked in and grabbed himself a cup of coffee.

“Oh, Kaiser,” Jonathan said, leaning back in his chair, looking as if he’d seen a ghost. “Just Colin, that’s who.”

“Mmm,” Kaiser said after a gulp. “Where were you guys?”

“We-”

“Because you guys left at, what? Two? Three o’clock yesterday? And when did you guys get back?”

I was going to answer, but before I could, Jonathan perked up and fell right into his trap. “Oh, probably around one or so,” he said. “But, I can’t be sure.”

“Mmm hmm, where’d you sleep?” he said, setting his coffee cup down and gripping the countertop with his hands. “Because I slept upstairs and didn’t see or hear you at all.”

“Well, I slept down here,” Jonathan said with a confidence he should have lacked.

“Really! Where? The woodshed? Because I’ve been awake for a while now and haven’t seen you at all. Where were you?”

“In the basement.”

“Bull fucking shit!” Kaiser spat, picking up and throwing his coffee mug at the wall behind Jonathan, where it shattered into a hundred pieces. “I just came from the fucking basement! I’ve been down there for well over two hours! You fucking lie Jonathan,” but Jonathan had already got up and started moving to the parlor. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” he said, chasing after him.

“Kaiser, stop it!” I said, grabbing his shoulder before he suddenly spun around and threw my arm off.

“Take your fucking hand off me Marcus!” he said, pulling his face back into a scowl. “What the fuck is wrong with you guys? You disappear randomly for hours and don’t say a word to me or anyone else when two people we’ve known have died similarly. That’s fucked, man,” he continued as I went into the parlor. “Don’t fucking walk away!” he shouted, following behind. “Fuck you Marcus! What the fuck is wrong with you! Because seriously, I don’t see how you can live with yourself.”

“What?” I said, completely taken aback. “What do you mean?” I could see out of the corner of my eye that Sarah was watching us from the foyer. ‘Trying not to get

involved,' I thought, which was partially correct, but not entirely.

"You fucking killed Renee! That's what I mean! Who in their right mind drives a fucking car while tripping on acid? In the middle of winter, no less! And you walk around and act like it wasn't your fucking fault, and yell at everyone else all you want, but it is, it is your fault! How screwed in the head do you have to be!" he spat while jerking and swinging his arms around.

I didn't know what to say. I was feeling so many different emotions, rage, betrayal, anger, sadness, and on top of that, he placed the blame for Renee's death squarely on me, something I already felt but didn't need to hear him say. Deep down, I felt he was right, but I'd never admit that to him. I clenched my fist and before he or I could fully comprehend what happened, I hit him across the face hard, hard enough for me to fracture my hand. He regained his composure, touching his face before giving me a Kubrick esc stare from behind his mop of disheveled hair. "Shut up, you fucking bastard!" I cursed as I shook out my hand and clenched it once more. I went to hit him again, but I didn't realize that my first strike was a lucky one, and now he was

prepared. He punched me in the gut, knocking the air out of me and making me heave before he pushed me back across the room into the wall.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” He shouted, hitting me again before I could catch my breath.

I fell to the floor, coughing and hacking as a thin acidic taste filled my mouth. After a moment, I tried to lift myself back up, but he knocked me back down, hitting me across the face so hard I could feel my teeth and jaw move. He bent down overtop of me, raising his fist to hit me again when there was a sudden loud whack that knocked him down.

“Stop it,” Jonathan said, looking down at him while clutching the fire poker in his hand.

Kaiser quickly leapt back up on his feet and glared at him. I don’t know how I hadn’t noticed it before, but Kaiser absolutely dwarfed Jonathan, and Jonathan wasn’t small by any means, standing around six feet and two inches. “You fucking hit me!” He said with a feeling of betrayal leaking through his words. “You fucking hit me… with that!”

“Kaiser, stop it!” he said, wavering his stance for a moment before he stood his ground again, tightening his grip on the poker. He glared at Kaiser like he was some kind of beast he could tame or force into submission, like this was his own vendetta. Thou shall against I will.

Kaiser lunged to grab the poker but Jonathan swung it again, hitting him in the leg and causing Kaiser to stumble for a second and wince in pain before he seized the poker, still in Jonathan’s hand. Jonathan tried to pull it back but Kaiser hit him in the jaw, knocking his teeth together with a clack before Kaiser hit him again. Jonathan staggered backwards, maintaining his hold on the poker for a second before Kaiser yanked it out of his hand. He lifted it up above his head and Jonathan looked up, throwing out his hands before Kaiser brought it down on top of him. You think he would have screamed, or yelped, or at least groaned slightly, but the only sound was the dull thud of the iron poker against Jonathan’s body before he collapsed to the floor in a heap.

“You piece of shit!” Kaiser shouted. “You fucking piece of shit!” But Jonathan made no sound, and the repetitive dull thuds soon grew into a sick splintering sound, like someone

smashing dried tree branches with a hammer, fracturing and shattering more with each successive blow. Every drop of pent up anger and rage that had been building in him suddenly came spilling out into the fold.

I looked at him, lifting and bearing the iron bar down on Jonathan again and again, and I could see then what I saw when he was chopping wood weeks ago, just how strong he was, and just how easily he could overpower Jonathan. I got up and grabbed Kaiser from behind, trying to pull him away before he flung me aside. He swung the poker wildly through the air, grazing my arm before he hit me in the calf with the barb, causing me to scream out and fall to the floor.

“What the fuck are you doing!” I heard someone shout before I saw June, still dressed in her pajamas, grab the poker in his hand. “Are you insane!”

“Get off me you bitch!” He snapped, backhanding her across the face with his other hand.

He lifted the poker above me and I shielded my face with my hands, preparing for another blow, when there was a

sudden set of thunderous footsteps heard rushing down the stairs.

“Hey!” Colin called out, completely oblivious to everything. “I figured I’d go for that coffee after-” I looked out to the foyer, and there he stood, frozen and wide eyed. “All.”

Kaiser turned over and saw him standing there and lowered the poker, but Colin was terrified, and immediately ran. “No, Colin don’t! Come back here!” he said, dropping the poker onto the floor as he turned to run after him. But before he could, I grabbed his leg and tripped him, pulling him down. He turned over and swiftly kicked me in the face, breaking my nose and sending me into a fog just long enough for him to get away.

He ran out through the front door and I picked myself up and chased after him as fast as I could. Blood streamed from my nose and down my shirt, and as soon as I reached the porch steps, I felt a sharp pain in my leg where he struck me before causing me to stumble. I got up again and looked around, limping down the porch step, seeing him run off towards the back, but Colin was nowhere to be seen; and as far as I could tell, Kaiser couldn’t see Colin either. I chased after him, but in the deep snow with the

stinging wind and my injuries, I could hardly keep up. I saw Kaiser disappear around the corner of the house, and about ten seconds later I rounded it myself, hearing the engine of Colin’s Camaro roar to life. “Kaiser!” I screamed. “Kaiser!”

Kaiser ran to the open garage door, but before he could get inside, Colin’s car burst out. The vision isn’t what stuck with me because I didn’t fully see it happen, but the sounds I heard. There was the sound of Kaiser shouting at him, muddled by the increasing growl of the heavy engine revving before being cut off by the squeal of the tires, the sound of Kaiser’s body being hit and drug along, head smacking off the trunk as his legs were pulled under, crushed as the back of his skull cracked against the frozen pavement.

Seven.

Within twenty minutes, three cop cars arrived, and within another ten Jonathan was being flown out by medivac. Shortly after Kaiser started arguing, June called the cops, and by the time Colin came down, they were already headed up. Kaiser didn't move at all after the car hit him, and shortly after Jonathan was flown out, he was flown out as well; later that day, he was pronounced dead.

Colin was almost immediately detained and took a breathalyzer test where they found his BAC was at 0.15, nearly double the legal driving limit. He spent the rest of the day at the police station, and before five p.m. the following day, his mother arrived at the airport to stay with him. Not long after, he went to court where he was facing up to 30 years in prison and a $50,000 fine. The judge let him off with $30,000 and no time; he left Montana not long after.

I only saw June once more after we left the house. It was in one of the dining halls at UJR, where she was waiting in line to get some pasta. We spoke for maybe a minute, only pleasantries, and once the conversation came to a

crossroads between leaving and our time up at the house, we chose the former.

I returned to UJR, but not for long. I was welcomed back to the dorms by their cheesy signs. “Spring into Spring!” and “New Year! New you!” but everywhere I went, whispers followed. By the time spring semester began, what happened up at the Dean’s house became common knowledge across the campus, and likely most of the state. I myself only did one interview which was for the school paper, an article on integration back into campus life after what happened, something I look back on and occasionally chuckle at the absurdity of. For the next month, papers headlined “The Horror at Anthill,” and “Hell Frozen Over,” with new insights revealed into the nightmare, but of course I never read any of them.

It’s strange. When I moved back to UJR, I breathed a long sigh of relief. The nightmare was over. Only, it wasn’t really. In fact, I only returned to what I had been trying to escape all along. Even though the money from the job did help, I ended up losing focus on classes and assignments, and the sleeping problems I picked up at the Dean’s house I carried back to UJR, and long into my adult life.

Sleep paralysis not only became a regular occurrence for me, but a nearly nightly one. Often I'd hear voices that weren't really there as I swayed between the dream lands and reality, those of people I knew well, my father and old friends I haven't seen in years, but also of Kaiser and Renee, the dead. I never heard their voices that often, but when I did, it was like I was back in that house again, completely oblivious to the fact they were dead.

"Where's Jonathan?" Kaiser asked, shutting the door behind himself before he flopped onto the couch in the room's corner. "I haven't seen him in like a week."

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't seen him eith-" and I opened my eyes, suddenly realizing they were never open to begin with. He wasn't there, and there was no couch in the corner of the room, but there was something. In the corner stood a tall creature with a pair of wings stretching out across the walls, each dark feather writhing together like a nest of maggots as it stared at me with two great gray eyes.

I never got used to this phenomenon. Occasionally, I was able to turn over and fall asleep again with little trouble, but those nights were the exceptions. Most nights, I

couldn’t even think about sleeping again. I’d stay up, sitting at my desk or pacing back and forth while drinking bottles of wine until I either blacked out or fell asleep. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for me to come out of an alcohol induced stupor, only to realize I hadn’t slept the entire night, having drank so much I could hardly move without falling, only getting into bed so that when Chippy awoke it at least looked like I had been sleeping.

If there was anything that kept me remotely on track that spring semester, it was having Chippy as a roommate, but even that was slowly deteriorating. When I got back, all we really did was hang out in the cramped dorm room, smoke, and drink. We didn’t want to talk about what happened up there, or I should say he didn’t want to.

“Just forget it, man,” he’d say. “No good is going to come from dwelling on that.”

I got what he was saying, and I think part of me agreed with him, but at the same time I wanted to be able to talk to someone about it. And as my classes started slipping away, and my sleep schedule grew progressively more abstract, we saw less and less of each other, until it was

maybe only a minute or two a day, a quick smoke after he got out of classes and headed off to see Erin.

I saw Erin only twice more. Once in the dining hall with Chippy, and the other during spring break, about a week before I left Montana. They invited me to come drinking with them at Beaufort Park, a place only about a ten-minute walk from our dorm, and right next to the Delta Rho Iota frat house. The place built a reputation for being the home of late night initiations, drunken riots, and boisterous parties, with beer cans and solo cups blossoming in small patches across the park as the snow thawed and life renewed.

We got together to celebrate Erin's birthday, though it wouldn't actually be here for another four days; she and Chippy were going to see her parents for the weekend. Chippy brought down a couple bottles of cheap vodka and planned on drinking them straight, something I wasn't too eager about as the stuff tasted like bug spray and often left me with a nasty hangover, so I bought a pack of seltzers from a nearby gas station before I joined up with them.

It was about nine at night when I got to the park. The last few days had actually been fairly warm, so I only wore a

thin jacket with a long sleeve shirt. But a bone chilling wind picked up, making everyone cold and rigid as it knocked around the half full cups Chippy was setting up for pong on a cement picnic table.

There were a few others invited other than myself, a couple guys who stuck with Chippy and a couple girls who stuck with Erin, but no one that I personally knew. I chatted briefly with one of them while Chippy, Erin, and the rest of them started a game.

“Nick,” he introduced, shaking my hand before he finished gulping down a cup of vodka. “Did you hear about that situation at the Dean’s that Chippy got wrapped up in?” he asked in a hushed voice while reaching for the bottle.

“Yeah, I did,” I said, drinking my own drink as I thought about how stupid this guy must be. Not two minutes before I introduced myself and somehow he didn’t make the connection that I was one of the few who stayed up there the entire time. Maybe he hadn’t read any of the papers like myself, or maybe he only knew of the incident through Chippy and his friend group. Either way, he had no idea I was involved. I could have easily told him I was there, but I didn’t.

“Yeah, must be pretty rough for him,” he said, twisting the cap off the bottle. “I couldn’t even imagine what it’s like dealing with that. How’s he even stay focused on anything?”

“I don’t know,” I said, starting to walk off a bit. The wind had picked up so much at this point that playing pong basically became impossible. The wind would catch the small ping-pong ball and throw it up to ten feet away from the table, and if it wasn’t doing that, it was blowing the cups halfway down the street.

I didn’t stay much longer after this. Due to my lack of sleep, I started zoning in and out, focusing on something small like a piece of trash rolling by, or a particular bunch of grass, only to realize I had been staring at it for several minutes. But I never actually felt tired, only drained, and as I stood there with them, spacing in and out, I began to feel something else too.

“Marcus,” He said, just standing there in my peripheral.

‘No, shut up,’ I thought, and walked over to Erin. “Hey, happy birthday,” I said, mustering up as much cheer as I could, which wasn’t much. “I brought these if you want

one," holding out the drinks as his silhouette still haunted my eye.

"Oh, thanks," she said meekly before taking one, looking as if it pained her to look at me for more than a few seconds.

"I also have that painting of yours if you want it back," I said, taking a sip of my drink as he disappeared. "It's-"

"No," she said, cutting me off suddenly. "No, I don't want it back. You can keep it if you want, otherwise just throw it away or something. I don't care."

"Oh, alright," I said, seeing the silhouette grow in my peripheral.

"Come on, let's go," he said, and we both disappeared.

I ended up keeping the painting even though it often caused me unease and left an ominous feeling in the air. I don't really know why, but I couldn't bring myself to get rid of it, and I began to have a sort of morbid fascination with it. Over the years I would bring it out and put it on display for days or weeks at a time, often just staring at it for hours as time bled away around me until I inevitably grew sick of the thing, tucking it away for long stretches until curiosity

took hold once more. It’s like some sick part of me longed to recall those days.

I moved from Montana just after spring break. Over the past couple of weeks, I had been talking with Sam Koontz, my friend who was currently in North Dakota. Eventually he ended up inviting me to stay with him again, and I pounced on the opportunity, packing my things and leaving the college less than three days after receiving his invitation.

Before I left though, I met with the Dean of Students once more. He heard about my lack of attendance and falling grades and wanted to see me himself. I met him in his office just after I received the invitation from Sam, and informed him that I didn’t plan on finishing out the semester.

“Oh, I’m very sorry to hear that. Very sorry indeed. But I can see why, and want to personally apologize for what happened to you over winter break. It was truly tragic and

things must be very difficult. Do you plan on attending fall semester, or over the summer?”

“Maybe,” I said, even though I couldn’t see myself ever returning.

“Alright,” he said in a very comforting tone as he folded his hands and leaned across his desk. “I can offer you an academic withdrawal. Nothing from this semester is going to be held on your record, and you won’t have to pay back any of the loans you took out for it. But Marcus, you’re so close to graduating, I beg you to please return and at least finish out your degree. You’re only maybe a year out from graduating.”

“I know,” I said. “I just can’t think straight right now.”

“I understand,” he said, letting out a sigh. It looked like he was about to say something else, and now I really wish he had the courage to, but he got up from his chair and held out his hand. “Well Marcus, I truly do wish you the best, and I look forward to seeing you back here at UJR.”

I shook his hand and left, never to see him again. It’s strange, yet again as I left his office, knowing full well that within a couple of days I’d be in North Dakota, and I was

overcome with an immense feeling of relief, but yet again this relief was misplaced.

This was the start of my wilderness years. I moved to North Dakota to find a stagnant country, one that magnified my thoughts with its absolute absence of life. Sam lived in the basement of a brick apartment complex, an old place that breathed and moved with its plumbing and heating. The place looked old, felt old, smelled old too, and I couldn't stand it. I'd often wander as Sam worked night shifts or slept throughout the day. I'd catch myself walking in the dead of night along the side of the highway or some long forgotten back road, miles from his apartment, rain pouring as thoughts of death and those dead possessed my mind. I could never bring myself to suicide, but that doesn't mean I didn't often think about it. Nights would go by where all I could think about was the different ways in which death might take me: a gun to the head, a drowning, or one more perfect crash.

I didn't stay with Sam long, and within a few months, I moved out. This started a trend that carried on until my late twenties. I'd move to a new town, stay there for a

couple months, even a year before I'd inevitably move on again, further from Montana.

My life became one drenched in a deep melancholy that seeped into every waking moment, a lazy decay of my own health and wellbeing that resulted in a gangly appearance and a reserved lip. These problems proved hard to uproot, in fact downright impossible by myself, and I figured that I may always remain a sort of wandering spirit, never tied down anywhere, and never the subject of anyone's fascination. I made a habit of visiting local art galleries, museums, concerts, and play halls. Like everything, I enjoyed these places in solitude, regulated to my own world of inner thoughts, completely detached from reality as I wandered the exhibits of the natural world and the studios of the imaginary one. I enjoyed them heartily, but never quite as much as I hoped. I would look out into crowds of smiling faces through shopping floor windows, watch them from park benches, cafes, and solitary venue seats, convinced that none could see me, or worse, that I was some horribly grotesque figure of my imagination, lies of course, but how was I to know?

Colin and I called each other often over those first few years, and I visited him twice. The first time was over Thanksgiving weekend. His stepfather owned a place near Trenton, just north of Seattle, Washington, a large sprawling property of forested marshlands. I remember just wandering the place with him over those days as he smoked a cone or cigarette, just skipping stones and staring at the open bogs, the retreating fog, the decaying bushes and cattails, the trees with their few remaining leaves, desperately clinging to the last days of autumn, and him. Something about him drew me in and made me long to stay there, just wandering those marshes. He was the one person I could talk to about everything, and being around him was the closest thing to happiness I experienced over those years. Everywhere else I hid from what happened at that house, but with him it was the only piece of history that existed. I started to notice things in him that I hadn't really recognized before: his carefree yet rebellious nature, the way he strolled about listlessly, that crisp chortle of a laugh he had. And I think I loved him in a way.

The second time I visited him was in the following April. The original plan was to stay about four days, but I ended up staying for well over two weeks and would've stayed

longer if it were possible. The night before I left, Colin decided to take me for a drive. The entire night we spent driving from town to town, gas station to gas station, anywhere but home. I think he didn't want to see me go and figured if we kept driving I might not leave, something I often smile at when looking back.

At one point we stopped at a diner. It must have been at two or three o'clock in the morning and we were the only ones in the place besides the all night staff and the couple insects that hovered around the dim lights. We sat there for a long time sipping black coffee and picking at a basket of vinegar soaked fries, just talking about our lives before the Dean's house and reminiscing about our childhoods. He told me about the summer he spent with his mother on the road, the years they spent in Virginia with her parents, and after a while, he asked me about my mother and memories of her.

"I don't even know anymore," I said. "I remember so little about her. I remember her taking me to the park. We used to go almost every day and feed the geese. Sometimes she'd buy me an ice cream and we'd walk downtown to the art galleries. I was… eight, I think, when she died. We had

been driving home when all of a sudden out of nowhere came this truck. It, it smashed into the side of the car and flipped the whole thing over. I still remember the sound it made, like a gunshot. Someone helped me out, and there was glass and people everywhere. I just remember waiting, waiting for my dad to arrive, waiting to go home, and waiting for my mom… My father had a hard time speaking to me after that."

He looked at me, then to the ground, and after a moment he pulled himself up, looking round the room before he said, "You know, it's not your fault."

"Yeah, I know," I said, but even then I felt conflicted.

He breathed in, "Alright," He said with still concerned eyes. "I hope you do," and we left soon after that.

I haven't seen him since that trip. We continued to stay in contact with each other for a while, but after a couple of years it was little more than yearly check-ins. Last I knew, he moved out of his parents' place down to Oregon with a boyfriend, but that's all he told me.

The night terrors and dream specters that began at that house haunted me throughout my traveling years,

sometimes only a couple nights at a time but others for weeks on end. The Tim Burton esc paralysis beings, those droning biplanes in the night, and that damn restless bed crawler would hound me as often as they could, but one among them wasn't as bad and would follow me both in and out of the dreamlands.

"Did you read any Nietzsche yet?" he asked from a chair in the corner of the room and I nearly cried, because I had.

Over those years, his spirit or memory would follow me around, and I made a habit of buying and reading philosophy books when he and the others came to visit, as it was one of the few things I found helped. The night he posed this question to me for the second time, I was up late once again, wine drunk and hungover while chain smoking Marlboro slates as I paced my room's meager floor space. My apartment at this time looked more at home in a novel by Dostoevsky or Tolstoy than in the twenty-first century; a rundown little one room on the fifth floor of the Donovan building, Madison, Wisconsin. A hideous green paint still barely clung to its walls and swollen floorboards (more like sponges really,) and only a couple pieces of sparsely placed furniture filled the place: a ratty old couch that smelled of

wet dog, a porcelain sink filled with a mixture of red wine and whatever I ate last, and an old iron bed frame with matching chair and desk, covered with books by the Greek, Roman, and the Eastern scholars, as well as Carl Jung and the aforementioned Nietzsche. It had been raining nonstop for three days, flooded roads below and a leaky ceiling above, droplets echoing as the rain roared outside the open window. I hadn't slept in two days, probably closer to three, and all those hallucinations attacked in a united unrelenting effort, stirring me awake again and again until finally I gave up and he came.

"Yes, yes, I have. Tell me," I replied. "What's your take on the three metamorphoses of the Ubermensch?"

He laughed and leaned back in his chair before he pulled out a cigar. "They're remarkably profound," he said while lighting his smoke. "Probably the closest model pathway we have to self actualization and rebirth. One can live through the stages of the camel and even the lion without realizing it until after reading about them. The camel being those who follow others' teachings and actions as law, and the lion being those who tear them down, ready to devour the camel and dragon alike."

“Mmm, but what of the last stage?” I said as a drop of water fell from the ceiling right on the very edge of my cigarette, sizzling against its ember as it put it out. “The child.”

“What of it?” he said smugly, blowing a plume of smoke into the dank, heavy air.

“Well, it’s just that you seem to put far more emphasis on the first two stages, specifically the lion, when according to Nietzsche himself those were but stepping stones to the final stage, that of the child.”

“Hmm,” he said, annoyed. “Well, to reach the child, one must first embody the lion, the destroyer, the monster.”

“Hmm,” I repeated. “And how’d that work for you?”

A twinge of anger shot across his face before he rose from his seat. “You know, you’re one to talk,” he said, pacing around my meager residence. “It’s funny. This place looks just like Jonathan’s.”

“That is funny,” I said with an honest laugh.

“No, no, it’s not,” he said, standing still as he examined the sink. “This place is fucking disgusting. It’s a sewer hole, a

rat's den. Is that what you are?" turning to me with the frank face of revolution. "A rat? A fucking lost little mut? A stray?"

His words cut me deep, and I turned to look at the ghost in the cracked mirror above the sink: long disheveled hair, dark bags below the eyes, and an uneven spread of stubble and pimples of every size coated his face. "I don't know," I said. "But I like to think I've grown beyond that."

"Not yet," he said with a bitter bite. "You still look like a fucking stray to me. You know, I don't understand-" he continued before I cut him off.

"No, no, you don't," I said, and a vitriolic sneer shot across his face before he left.

I moved to Vermont in the autumn of my 28th year. For the past six years, I had been jumping from one city to the next, never with any sort of destination in mind. It felt like ever since I left the Dean's house I had been running,

running as far away as I could, but now, I no longer felt like running. I was tired.

I was truly alone when I arrived. Any friendships I had died years ago, along with any relations. It's strange, but when I arrived somewhere new before I would breathe in the fresh air and say to myself, "Yes. This is it. I can live with this," but it never worked out. When I came to Dunham, Vermont, however, I felt exhausted. I had no intention of staying here any longer than I did anywhere else; and for the first few months, I felt this way, never reaching out to anyone and rarely leaving my room for anything other than work and errands.

It was about four months after I moved to Dunham that I met my soon to be wife, Rachel. It was during another particularly stormy afternoon that I ran into her at an art exhibit in the downtown area, a showing of the works of one David Embro. His paintings were ghastly things, bright blood reds and oranges that were drawn out into cruel expressions and morbid portrayals of the human anatomy. Neither of us liked them very much, and they gave me the same feeling as that painting of the house, but we started meeting each other at art exhibitions because of it, and

soon enough, outside of them as well, and once I got a good paying job working for the railroad, we moved in with each other.

It's strange. Out of everyone I thought Chippy would be the most likely to stay in touch with me, but I only had a couple brief conversations with him on the internet before messages started being left on read, and soon completely ignored.

I never heard from June, Matt, or Erin again, but shortly after Rachel and I moved in together, about two weeks before Christmas, I received a letter in the mail, this time addressed from Jonathan.

At first I wanted to open it right away and then, curiously, I didn't want to open it at all. But after it spent a couple days on my desk, during which all I could do was pace around and think about what it possibly said, I opened it.

Dear Marcus, I was hoping that you might still be up for that trip to Germany. If not, I understand, it has been many years now, but if you are still interested, I included a check that should cover

the flight and a hotel. I figured May would be nice. -Jonathan Entes

I was taken aback and disappointed by just how short the letter was and just how little it said. He didn't even leave his number, or tell me where in Germany he planned on going, or what date specifically, and frankly I felt a little insulted by the inclusion of the check; though I understood his reasoning, last time he saw me I had no money to speak of. I ended up sending him a follow-up letter asking for more information and in March he told me to meet him in Hannover on the first of May, where we'd meet at a hotel he specified, the Pritz.

At around 11:30 at night on the 30th of April, I touched down in Hannover. I never traveled abroad before and quickly became overwhelmed; making my way around a foreign city without knowing the language, the customs, or really everything, for that matter. I was soon relieved to find that a good portion of the population spoke English or

could at least understand what I was saying, and with some help, I was able to make it to the hotel. It was located near the half-timbered buildings and cobbled roads of old town. The place held this wonderful picturesque quality which was only aided by the open stars and dream-like silence of the night. It looked like a village plucked straight out of a fairy tale, modernized ever so slightly to not throw off the eye, but the integral magic was left intact. I checked in and got into my room located on the fifth floor overlooking Castle street, and within minutes I fell asleep.

The next morning I awoke and walked across the street to a local deli where I ordered breakfast, a platter of various cheeses, cured meats, breads, and spreads. It was all delicious, but many of the spreads I have a hard time describing because I didn't truly know what they were: sooty yellows, deep oranges, vibrant greens, and deifying plums. I had no idea when Jonathan would be arriving and though it was a gloomy spring day, I decided to eat outside, watching the door to the hotel to see if I could catch him as he arrived. As it turned out, this was a terrible day to eat outside. The wind picked up often when I didn't expect it to, carrying with it napkins and pieces of bread. More than once I had to get up and jog after a scrap that fluttered

away down the road, all while locals judged me from their shops and street corners. I could only laugh in embarrassment, and before long I gave up and returned to my room as the wind brought with it first a trickle of raindrops, and then a full storm, complete with thunder and lightning. I sat in my room, stretching out the lifespan of my breakfast tray as long as I could while watching the rain wash over that sleepy city. It was such a strange feeling, sitting there as the storm passed through this place I only heard and dreamed of. When Jonathan originally asked me, I didn't really think that I'd ever make it, and now I was finally here, standing in a hotel on Castle street waiting for him to arrive.

At first, I didn't even recognize him when I saw him again. I started waiting in the lobby when the storm really picked up, and at around five I saw what appeared to be a much older man checking in. He wore a long black overcoat, now far too large for him, and steadied himself with a cane. His once thick black hair began to thin out front and gave way along the left side to reveal a short, nasty scar above his ear. It was only when he spoke at the front desk that I thought it may be him, but even then his voice, once confident and commanding, was now a withered rasp and

little more than a whisper. I got up out of my chair, suspecting it was him, and when he turned around, my suspicions were laid to rest.

“Marcus?” he said, starting over to me.

“Jonathan! Jesus, it’s good to see you!” I said, shaking his hand liberally. “I was starting to wonder if you’d make it.”

I helped him carry his bags to his room, a large suite on the top floor, and after we went to a bar across the street; Der silberne Dackel, or The Silver Dachshund. It was terribly sad watching him move around, walk across the street, or even take a sip of beer. It’s like he was completely exhausted of strength. Everything he did caused him great pain, leaving him to hobble around and lift his glass with such a shaky hand I thought he may drop it.

“You got that?” I joked as he took a drink.

“Fucking goddamn it!” He cursed under his breath as the mug clanged against the table. “Yeah, it’s just hard to keep a grip on anything when you have so much damn metal in your hands.” He rolled up his sleeve, revealing a thin arm riddled with deep scars. “I have five plates and thirty odd screws in this arm and shoulder, three plates and twenty

screws in my left, and more to top that in my hands and legs. Really did a number on me," he said with a chuckle that ended in a cough that could scare most anyone out of smoking. "So, how've you been Marcus?" he said after clearing his throat.

I almost wanted to cry. Where once stood a strong and confident young man, there now sat only a feeble and sad reflection of him, barely able to stand on his own legs without help. It's like I was looking at the embodiment of everything he wasn't before, the pieces of him that should have been discarded now amalgamated and possessing his body. "Oh, I've been doing better," I said, and I laughed slightly at the way it came out. "But I can't help but feel at least slightly responsible for what happened."

"Don't go and do that to yourself," he started sharply. "It's because of him and him alone."

I hesitated for a moment. I didn't want to get into an argument after only seeing him for an hour, but the urge to say something overtook me. "No, no," I said. "I hit him first. I didn't want to admit he was right, but he was. It was my fault Renee died, and he never hit anyone fir-"

“You didn’t know him like I did!” he said, suddenly cutting me off. “He was a monster, and it’s his fault how things turned out. Don’t go blaming yourself for it.”

I wanted to say more, but restrained myself. “Alright,” I said. “Let’s get something to eat.”

The rest of the night went by with relative ease. We each ordered our food, had a few more drinks, and then went to bed for the night, but that wasn’t the only time we’d speak about what happened during our trip.

The following couple of days were spent in the museums and galleries of Hannover, the Sprengel, the Landesmuseum, and the Herrenhausen Gardens, roaming the courtyards by day and the halls by night. I’m sure some people would’ve found this terribly dull, but to be honest I don’t know what else Jonathan would have been up for, as even with this he’d have to stop often to catch his breath when walking for any longer than a couple minutes. But I had also made a habit of visiting places like these over the years, and so to me, it was immensely enjoyable. We followed this routine across our trip, passing through Dortmund, Frankfurt, and Nuremberg before circling back up to Berlin; and it was on the train ride up from

Nuremberg to Berlin that Jonathan revealed something to me that very well could have changed my entire outlook on everything that happened, but didn't.

"That bastard really put us through hell, didn't he?" he said in reference to the Dean.

"I don't know if that's fair to say."

"Of course it is! He set up the whole thing, didn't he?"

"Well, yeah, but why should that matter?"

It looked like he was about to burst into a tirade when he saw the look of complete confusion on my face. "What?" he said, collecting himself. "Wait, do you know?"

"Know what?"

He leaned back in his seat and breathed out a long, raspy sigh. He turned and looked out the window of the train, his eyes desperately trying, begging to fix themselves on anything other than my own, when he finally submitted and leaned forward. "It was all an experiment."

When he said this, it was like the whole world melted away around me. All the other passengers, the sound of the train

passing along the tracks, and Jonathan's words suddenly disappeared, his lips moving idly as I heard the sound of the wind howling once more, the chugging of the snowblower, the laughs we shared that first night, and the roar of my cars engine before it crashed. Was it all fake? Was all our suffering for not but an experiment? "What?" I said, unintentionally cutting him off mid sentence.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you would have known by now. I figured someone from the school would have told you or something. Sarah Walther published a paper on her findings about a year after it happened. Apparently it was set up as a study for her thesis, something about examining groups in a semi-closed environment and how humans naturally work together despite their nurture, where they'd have to work together and so on, but, I mean, it was a failure. It was supposed to be harmless, hell, people sat his house countless times before, I sat it before, it wasn't supposed to be any different. I was supposed to be the control group actually," he gave a light chuckle. "Imagine my reaction to that when reading her account of when she first arrived," he said as another chuckle came and quickly gave way.

“Why didn’t they tell us? Aren’t they supposed to do that?”

“Apparently not. Since the Dean wasn’t directly involved in anything that happened and Sarah was only observing what played out, there was no need for informed consent. On paper, at least before anything happened, it was just another house sitting job.”

I felt enraged. How was this allowed to happen? The Dean had every chance to tell me, but he didn’t, even after. It was all just for some stupid experiment, Renee’s death, Sjur’s death, Kaiser’s death, all for nothing but a thesis. At once I wanted to burst out in curses. That fucking man, it was all his fault; it was his fault how we both turned out! But then something happened, and I dwelled on what Jonathan said last. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a passenger pass by our window for the briefest of moments. He shot me an all too familiar child-like smirk and a spiked crown of golden hair sat atop his head, a dark topcoat and red scarf bellowing behind him as he continued down the train. He was gone. Jonathan didn’t see him, but he didn’t have to. It was just a house sitting job, and I could either go on from here blaming them, or I could accept my responsibility for what happened and move on.

“You’re right,” I said. “It was just a house sitting job.”

“What?” He said, taken aback. “Aren’t you bothered at all?”

“Yes, I’m furious that I was never told,” I said. “But it doesn’t really matter, does it? What happened was our fault, but mostly mine, and I’m sorry.” I could see he was getting ready to stop me, leaning forward and raising his hand in objection, but I cut him off before he could. “No,” I said. “No, I need to say this. If I stopped and got someone to help me, Renee may not have died. And if I hadn’t hit Kaiser that day, I don’t think you’d be where you are now, and I’m sorry for that. I’ve spent six years running from everything that happened there and only recently have I come to terms with it. Looking back, it may have been an experiment, but it wasn’t then, not for us at least, it was just… life. I hated to admit that for a long time, but even though that place is filled with some of the worst memories of my life, most even, it also contains a few I couldn’t bear to live without.”

A long pause sat between us as the train jostled along the tracks, nudging me about as I looked out the window and he finally responded. “I can’t say that myself. There’s no memory of that place I particularly like, enjoy, or can think

fondly of.” He leaned back in his chair and looked out the window as I did.

“I think that’s a lie,” I said, and he looked at me without turning before he went back to the window.

“No. No, it’s not,” he said bitterly. “I hate that place. And any time I stop to think about it, I can’t move on… I think I died back there, should have died back there. And there’s been many days I’ve tried to finish that. I just couldn’t ever bring myself to.”

I turned from the window and stared at him. “What?” I said loudly, and he pulled back to look at me as if in shock. “Do you even remember what you told me after that house party?”

“Not particularly.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “No?” I said.

“No.”

“You said that what you just implied is an incredibly selfish thing, and that one can’t possibly judge when their story ends.”

“I was foolish and ignorant then.”

“You’re foolish and ignorant now!” I retorted and his head shot up, but shortly after I could see in his eyes that he remembered that moment back then. “Hell,” I laughed. “You haven’t even given me your phone number after all this time.”

He thought for a moment and laughed as well. “Here,” he said, snatching a napkin and a pen. “I don’t really call anyone anymore, but feel free to any time,” handing me the elusive number before he stood up. “I’m getting some fresh air,” he said before exiting.

I followed him, and as it turned out, the fresh air was indeed a smoke. I joined him and didn’t press any further, and for the rest of the ride, we were mostly silent. But before the trip ended and we parted ways, there was one last thing I had to know, one thing I needed to ask him. “So, did they ever find Sjur?”

“Yes, about three months after you left. Once the snow started melting in the mountains, they found him several miles from the house. They think he died shortly after he

disappeared, fell down into a tree well, but something about that doesn't sit right with me."

The news didn't surprise me. I think we all knew back then that he must have died, but that didn't make it any less sad or depressing. But in a way it was also relieving, finally knowing. I thought about the few moments I shared with him, wishing I could go back and see him again, make him feel happier, convince him he wasn't going to die, but even then, by some hauntingly eerie chance of foresight, he already knew. He knew he was going to die.

I thought about it the entire flight home, about what he may have done if he lived on, about what we all may have done. Maybe none of this would have happened and we all would have become fast friends and instead of Jonathan and I meeting alone, it could have been all of us. Or maybe things were destined to turn out the way they did, and we just have to accept them along with our actions and move

on the best we can. With acceptance comes repentance, and from repentance, forgiveness, a purifying gift that comes not from man alone, but is endowed from above. Maybe Kaiser, Renee, and Sjur had all died, but a little piece inside me, a piece that I long ignored, said otherwise. Maybe they weren't gone, not entirely, maybe they were just sort of absent, and every once in a while, near a stream in the summer, beneath a tree in autumn, during a blizzard in the winter, or while crossing back into Montana during the spring, I could see a little piece of them like a brilliant white owl, and for the briefest of moments, feel their presence once again.